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Strong foundations: early childhood care and education

Early childhood care and education in Central America: challenges and prospects

Ana Patricia Elvir, Celso Luis Asensio
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“Learning begins at birth. This calls for early childhood care and initial education. These can be provided through arrangements involving families, communities, or institutional programmes, as appropriate.”

World Declaration on
Education for All (Article 5)

Jomtien, 1990

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Introduction

This report explores and analyses the progress made and challenges faced with early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Central America during the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century. It assesses the role played by governments through their policies in this sector and the contribution made by society as a whole, including families and non-governmental organizations.

This report was commissioned from Save the Children (STC) by UNESCO. Its objective is to provide information about the region for use in preparing the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007, whose subject will be early childhood care and education, especially in the most vulnerable and disadvantaged sections of society.

For the purposes of this report, early childhood means the ages from 0 to 6. Comprehensive protection and education for this age group involves the provision of: (a) health services, particularly attended childbirth, breastfeeding, immunization, care for sick children and nutrition; (b) a safe environment for play and socialization; (c) programmes to prepare children for primary school; (d) childcare for children of working parents; (e) training for parents in looking after and caring for children; and (f) community development and social cohesion activities.

According to the goals approved by governments in the Dakar Framework for Action (April 2000), early childhood care and education services should be comprehensive, focusing on all childhood growth, development and education needs. They should also be coordinated, combining the efforts of the State, the family and the community. These efforts should translate into better access, quality and equity in initial education. By initial education are meant all programmes, formal or informal, whose objective is the development of children aged 0 to 6, encompassing preschool education and a variety of initial education and childhood care programmes. Preparation for primary school, meanwhile, is understood to include adaptation of the early years (first and second) of primary school to reflect the fact that children at this level are still in their early childhood.

The commitment of governments and societies to ECCE should be manifested in the formulation and adoption of laws, policies and plans of national scope, such as the

establishment of free, compulsory preschool education, or in higher budget allocations for child protection. Plans should be backed up by permanent monitoring and evaluation systems, and this oversight should include following up their progress by collecting and publicizing the most relevant statistics.

It is important to realize that the goal of early childhood care and education is unlike the other Education for All goals. First, no quantitative targets have been set for access and quality, as they have for the other goals. Second, the priority given to this policy area by governments varies greatly from country to country. In many poor countries, there is still a belief that these are primarily responsibilities for the family rather than the State. Another characteristic is that this goal encompasses education, health and other biological, psychological and social fields, implying a comprehensive and coordinated multisectoral approach.

The report highlights four countries in the region, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, as being the worst affected by poverty and thus having the greatest problems and needs in this field. Information from Belize,[1] Costa Rica and Panama is also included, however, to provide a comparative overview of the region.

The report is divided into three chapters. The first describes and analyses the background to the emergence of early childhood care and education in Central America and the influence that the regional context has had on it. The second chapter deals with the current situation of early childhood and with progress in developing policies and programmes in this area. The third chapter analyses the countries' policies and outlook.

This report was made possible by the collaboration of the Save the Children teams working in Central America and their governmental and non-governmental contacts in the field of childhood care and education. The relevant literature was reviewed for the report, consisting in the main of quantitative and qualitative information from health, education and other ministries working with children and families, from international organizations working in this area, and from civil society institutions.

[1] Belize has become a new actor in the region since joining the Central American Integration System (SICA) in 2000.

To obtain different perspectives on the subject, information sessions were also held with key actors from both governmental institutions and non-governmental agencies. These sessions provided an opportunity to share views on the state of early childhood care in the region and to identify innovative projects.

The report deals with early childhood care and education in as much depth as possible, given the information available. In certain cases, the scope for regionwide analysis was limited because information was only available for some countries, suggesting a need to create a regional system of early childhood indicators so that care and education policies can be systematically tracked and evaluated.

By analysing information from a variety of sources, this document does succeed, notwithstanding these limitations, in providing an initial evaluation of progress, challenges and prospects for early childhood care and education in the region. It also provides material for policymaking and strategy in pursuit of this goal, whose strategic importance led to its being ranked first of the six adopted by the Declaration on Education for All.

Executive summary

The number of 0 to 9-year-olds in Central America in 2005 has been estimated at 10.4 million, representing some 25.8% of a population which was growing by 2% a year on average (see Annex 1). The care and education of this child population is one of the greatest social challenges for the governments and societies of Central America, since the social and economic development of the region's countries largely depends on these children being provided in infancy with the basic conditions they need for their biological, psycho-affective, intellectual and social development.

With the exception of health services and, to a lesser extent, the protection of children at risk of abandonment, the care and education of this population group in Central America has traditionally been more a matter for families than for public and social institutions, partly because of budgetary constraints on governments and partly because of the absence of a comprehensive approach to the development of children under 8. This situation has been changing over the last 15 years, however.

In the early 1990s, under the influence of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), early childhood care and education entered a new stage in the region. This period coincided with the ending of a phase of Central American history dominated by armed conflict, so that the conditions were created for political stability, peace, democracy and economic revival in the countries.

The international movement generated by the CRC helped arouse a growing commitment to comprehensive childhood care among the governments and societies of Central America. Progress has included the passing of laws that have extended children's rights, the creation of institutions dedicated exclusively to caring for children, and the expansion of preschool education services, health services to counter infant and maternal mortality, and nutrition services to improve children's dietary situation.

While progress has been considerable, it has not yet been sufficient to make up for the region's historical shortcomings in the field of early childhood care and education or the effects of the social inequity and chronic poverty affecting half of all Central Americans. In only two countries, Costa Rica and Panama, are the indicators for the social situation of

young children encouraging. In El Salvador, these indicators are clearly changing for the better. In Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, however, they remain alarming, and resolute action is required. Belize is a case that requires special monitoring, since the country's ranking in the Human Development Index has dropped significantly in the last five years.

Where education is concerned, the most positive development has been the growing emphasis on initial education in national education systems and an increase in preschool education coverage that, while modest, suggests a determination in society to extend educational rights to early childhood. In 2003, net enrolment rates in the region for the 3/4 to 6-year-old group were between 21% and 52%, including both formal and informal educational settings. Belize, Honduras and Nicaragua had the lowest rates. In Guatemala and El Salvador, gross coverage rates more than doubled in the 1998-2003 period. While progress fell off in Costa Rica and Panama, these two countries still had the highest enrolment rates in the region.

Education coverage for the 0 to 3/4 group is still very modest in almost all the countries. Educational investment as a share of GDP remains very low, with a regional average of 4%. A large proportion of education ministry budgets go on pay, which accounts for an average of 85% of total spending.

Preschool education quality is a major challenge. Although all the countries require prospective teachers at this level to have completed initial education studies, most preschool teaching staff have not done so. In El Salvador, for example, just 10.2% of teachers working in nursery education have an honours degree (*licenciatura*), while in Nicaragua the non-formal system of pre-primary education, which has the greatest coverage in the country, is mainly staffed by people who have completed primary schooling only.

Although preschool education programmes take a comprehensive approach that includes the development of attitudes, skills, knowledge and values for life and preparation for the first year of school, the lack of sufficiently qualified staff is not conducive to good teaching. This is compounded by the shortage of educational resources and of appropriate teaching and learning environments.

It is in the area of health that early childhood care has progressed most. Mortality rates for children under 1 have come down in all the countries, falling from 41 to 26 on average for

every 1,000 live births over the 1990-2004 period, although Guatemala remains a cause for concern, as it has the highest infant mortality indices in the region (33 for every 1,000 live births). There have been improvements in health care for expectant mothers and in the proportion of births attended by trained personnel, which now averages 86 women out of every 100. Only in Guatemala is the percentage of mothers attended by trained personnel during childbirth alarmingly low (26%), something that might explain why this is the country with the highest rate of under-one mortality.

Despite the progress made in this area, moderate or severe malnutrition is still widespread in early childhood, affecting almost a quarter of all children under 5 in the region. Guatemala is the country with the highest indices of severe infant malnutrition, with fully half of under-fives affected, followed by Honduras, where one in every three children under five suffers from severe malnutrition.

At the same time as the lot of young children is improving, new issues of social concern are emerging, in particular the ever-higher numbers of AIDS sufferers among under-fourteens, particularly in Honduras. This issue has been little studied, so that the scale of the problem is not known with any certainty. Another emerging challenge concerns the registration of children at birth, something that relates directly to the right to a name and nationality. All that is known is that large-scale efforts are being made on this front in Nicaragua, but the problem is believed to be latent in all the countries. Likewise, the risks children run of ill-treatment, abandonment, abuse, violence and exploitation for their labour have become increasingly visible. Some of these problems are beginning to become a matter of concern for public institutions and policies, but they are still not receiving enough attention and the situation is worsening as a result of poverty and the limited capacity of governments for relieving this and preventing its worst effects on children.

I. Rationale and background

A. Why invest in early childhood?

Many aspects in the life of a human being are determined between the ages of 0 and 6. Scientific research has shown that these years are essential for the development of intelligence, personality and social behaviour (Myers, 1995). This is because children's physiological and psychological structures are in full development between these ages. Early childhood is the age when basic skills like walking, talking and relating to others are learned, and when self-confidence is acquired. It is, then, the time in life when stimulation can have the greatest influence on development, because it acts on faculties that are still maturing.

Development during early childhood is affected by nutritional and health status and by the way a child interacts with the people and things in its environment (Dobbing, cited by Myers, 1995). Children who receive consistent, caring attention are generally better nourished and less apt to be sick (Zeitlin, cited by Myers, 1995). Properly developed intelligence, personality and social behaviour make children more likely to learn and do well at school. Education in the early years, whether in the home or elsewhere, is needed to accompany this development process. This education needs to stimulate children's all-round development, i.e., their mental, physical, emotional and social development.

Initial education is particularly necessary for the children of the poor. Children tend to develop more slowly in lower-income families, thus acquiring a relative inequality that will remain with them for life, preventing them in turn from escaping from poverty. Timely investment in the early learning and development of children from socio-economically vulnerable families is a policy that can go some way towards compensating for these inequalities. This early intervention can have long-term benefits for children from disadvantaged sectors.

Initial education requires a specific approach by educators and support staff, as it is carried out during years that are decisive for the development of human beings and because the child receiving it is in the midst of the maturing process (Castillejo, 1989). Accordingly, this education needs to be tailored to children's physical, motor and mental development; it must

be suited to the particular characteristics of the social environment and system of relationships in which they are growing up; and teaching must be centred upon them, respecting the individual characteristics that make them unique. And it must be imparted through activity and play, because it is by way of these that small children learn.

These ideas seem very obvious now, but in the mid-twentieth century this was not the case. Social awareness of the need for initial education is a fairly recent cultural change. Again, it was only fairly recently that initial education began to be seen as a civic right and a public responsibility. As an area for international action, it emerged with the Jomtien Declaration of 1990, which sets as an objective for signatory countries the "expansion of early childhood care and developmental activities, including family and community interventions, ***especially*** for poor, disadvantaged and disabled children". With these ideas as a frame of reference, we shall use the following sections to analyse progress in this field in Central America over the last 15 years.

B. The historical development of ECCE

Involvement by the public sector and non-governmental organizations in early childhood care and education is a recent phenomenon in Central America. The earliest efforts date from the mid-twentieth century. Before that time, childhood care and education were not a priority in the countries' social policies. It was accepted that educating and caring for small children were activities for the private sphere, and thus almost exclusively a responsibility for families. As a result, the character and quality of childhood care and education varied depending on the socio-economic level of parents and teachers and their particular view of childhood, the worst placed being children from the lowest strata of society. This situation has undergone changes in recent decades, however, most recently since the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. While they do not go far enough, these changes have improved the lot of children under 6 where the right to early care and education is concerned.

The earliest initial education establishments in Central America were private-sector ventures that appeared in the late nineteenth century. In the mid-twentieth century, these schools became part of national education systems. In El Salvador, for example, the first nursery school was founded in 1886, following the method of a German educator, Guillermo Federico Froebel, who was associated with the kindergarten approach. In 1941 this approach was adopted in the country's infant

education system under the Organic Law on Public Education (MINED, 2005). Something similar happened in Honduras. Preschool education was initiated in 1907 with the opening of private schools which were subsequently declared (by the presidential decree of 1953) to be the first level in the education system (Secretaría de Educación, 1997).

Then, as part of efforts towards regional integration, in June 1962 the education ministers of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua signed the Central American Convention on the Basic Unification of Education (1962), which stipulates that the education system is part of a unitary process encompassing pre-primary, primary, secondary and higher education.

By 1990 or so, all the countries in the region had preschool education programmes in place, but with very modest coverage. In 1991, regional coverage was 27% in the public sector and 32% in the private sector (Myers, 1995). Only in Costa Rica and Panama were gross preschool enrolment rates above the regional average. While the remaining countries –the region's poorest– did share in the progress with preschool education, their coverage was far below the averages.

One striking development by 1990 was the large increase in the share of early childhood education services provided by the non-governmental sector, particularly in socially disadvantaged sectors, indicating new ways of thinking in society about childhood and the importance of early intervention. Non-governmental agencies had thus become key actors in childhood care and education policy, offering new capacities to help meet the needs of small children. In most of the countries, in fact, non-formal preschool establishments run by non-governmental agencies predominated.

Nonetheless, the coverage of both governmental and non-governmental programmes was largely confined to children who were a year away from starting primary school; generally speaking, these programmes' coverage of poor and indigenous populations was still relatively low, and the same was true of rural children as compared to urban ones (Myers, 1995).

Where protection is concerned, government policies and programmes for early childhood emerged throughout the region during the twentieth century, giving effect to family legislation. A variety of non-governmental programmes also appeared in all the countries in

response to the growing needs of small children affected by the poverty and social deprivation that characterized Latin American societies throughout the twentieth century.

In general, governments' childhood care policies in this period did not reflect a comprehensive approach to childhood development encompassing the mind, the body, emotions and social and family relationships. These policies were chiefly inspired by the "irregular situation" doctrine, whose focus was on determining how the law should be applied to children who broke it, and by the principle of protection for the vulnerable. Accordingly, their approach was essentially corrective and welfare-oriented. Even at their best, these policies emphasized the duties of parents and children rather than their rights, along with some aspects of family protection. Furthermore, they did not draw clear distinctions between children and adolescents, who were treated alike as "minors". Nor did they differentiate between the responsibilities and spheres of action vis-à-vis children of the State, society generally, the community and the family.

Against this background, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child marked a new stage in early childhood care and education in Central America. In the case of governments, the CRC led to far-reaching reforms in Central American legislation on children and the family that introduced the comprehensive care philosophy for the first time. The result of these reforms was that the countries created legislative frameworks which, while not fully superseding the "irregular situation" doctrine, were more consistent with children's rights and the protective function of the State, society and the family. This new legislation was accompanied, furthermore, by the introduction of new government programmes and the creation of bodies with responsibility for promoting and coordinating specialized policies for children. In the case of non-governmental organizations, it is thanks to the conditions created by the CRC that they have been involved in debating, analysing and modifying the political status of the under-six population.

Thus it was that the precepts of the CRC and the doctrine of comprehensive protection for children were incorporated into the family codes of El Salvador, Belize and Panama during the 1990s. Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, meanwhile, approved childhood and adolescence codes with constitutional status. The countries progressed at different paces with the formulation and approval of the new legislation. The first was El Salvador, where the Family Code was reformed in 1994, and the last was Guatemala, where the Law on

Comprehensive Protection for Children and Adolescents was passed in 2003. The childhood and adolescence codes of Belize, Costa Rica and Nicaragua were approved in 1998 (see Annex 2).

As well as adopting new children's legislation, the Central American governments created secretariats attached to the executive with responsibility for coordinating CRC compliance policies (see Annex 3). In most cases these secretariats came under the authority of the first lady, and this gave them a political cast that has influenced their working style and the focus of their priorities. The executive strength of these secretariats, and their capacity for bringing multisectoral efforts to bear, is still an issue on the development policy agendas of the region's countries. Besides government secretariats, civil society secretariats were also created to promote the CRC at a non-governmental level and monitor government compliance with it. These parallel secretariats, together with other bodies carrying out coordinating functions at the non-governmental level, are now playing a vital role in ensuring that the CRC becomes a shared democratic responsibility for all sections of society in the different countries (see Annex 4).

The interest in early childhood that emerged with the CRC was given a further impetus by the adoption in Jomtien (1990) of the international agreements on meeting basic learning needs and then by the approval of the Dakar "Education for All" Framework for Action (2000). It was also boosted by the adoption in 2000 of the Millennium Development Goals, which include six targets relating directly to early childhood. All these international declarations reinforced the comprehensive childhood protection approach, were promptly signed by the Central American governments, and have had consequences for education policies and the organization of education systems in these countries.

Thus, in the 1990s education systems took the decision to extend coverage to children younger than 7, the traditional age for entering the first year of primary school in most of the countries. In Costa Rica, the reformed Constitution of 1997 made the last year of preschool education compulsory for children aged five and a half. Nursery education was made compulsory for children aged 4 to 6 in El Salvador with the passing of the General Education Law of 1996, and in Panama by the Organic Law on Education of 1995. In Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua, preschool education is still optional, but it has been fully

integrated into the basic education system as a result of the new education laws of the 1990s (see Annex 5).

During the 1990s, again, all the countries introduced education reforms and formulated new public policies to facilitate early school enrolment and improve the quality of preschool education programmes, in both the formal and non-formal systems. Preschool education syllabuses were also revised and reformed with the aim of modernizing them and adapting them to the new teaching paradigms of comprehensive early childhood education.

The new rights regime and educational changes that emerged in Central America with the CRC is not in itself a guarantee of early childhood care and education. On the contrary, follow-up of the CRC in Central America 15 years after its adoption reveals that much remains to be done before the commitments accepted then are fulfilled (see Annex 6). The changes so far, however, reflect the desire and determination of Central American societies to improve in this area, and it is in this respect that they can be seen as progress. In addition, the region is gradually moving towards a cultural paradigm shift in relation to children under 6, one that is consistent with scientific knowledge about the benefits of early care and education. To make further progress, though, the countries of the region need to close the gap between the laws protecting children and the social reality they live in. The historical, social and economic context of Central America today makes this a challenging task.

C. How the regional context has influenced ECCE

The Central American context today is characterized by major social failings inherited from almost 30 years of armed conflict; the poverty of most of the population; social inequity associated with economic, ethnic, geographical and gender characteristics; inadequate social investment by governments; the break-up of families because of migration; and the effects of natural disasters, which have damaged national economies. Small children, and indigenous and rural children in particular, are the worst affected by this situation because they are the most vulnerable group in the whole population and because the resources and mechanisms available for their care and education do not match the need. Children's unmet needs are compounded by the further strain of the region's demographic growth.

In the early 1990s, a chapter of Central American history characterized by armed conflict was brought to an end. The peace agreements signed in Esquipulas, Guatemala, by five Central American countries helped bring about a regional situation favourable to the peaceful settlement of political conflicts, the

establishment of democracy and the revitalization of national economies. The restoration of political stability boosted economic growth and opportunities for domestic and foreign investment.

By the end of the decade, most of the countries had improved their macroeconomic and social indicators, although in the case of the latter this was due to the generous but short-lived investment of international (and some domestic) resources in alleviating the legacy of armed conflict.

Social investment produced results in the form of higher life expectancy, lower infant mortality and wider coverage for education and health services. While promising, these changes were not enough for the region to make good its long-standing human development shortcomings (UNDP, 2003), particularly in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras.

The social position of the region in the mid-1990s was not favourable to comprehensive childhood development. Although the countries' economies had grown, poverty and social inequity remained very acute. According to reports by the civil society organizations following up the CRC, in 1996 some 83% of Guatemalan children lived in poverty and 150,000 of them died as a result between 1990 and 1995 (PRODEN, 1996). In Honduras, it is estimated that 66% of children aged 0 to 14 were living below the poverty line in 1999 (COIPRODEN, 2005). In Costa Rica, 17% of the population aged 0 to 6 was living in extreme poverty in 2002 and 33.6% of that population had unmet basic needs that year (COSECODENI, 2004). In Nicaragua and El Salvador, poverty mainly affected children in the countryside, who make up the bulk of the poor (CODENI, 2002; FESPAD, 2005).

Remedying the social failings of Central America will be neither easy nor quick. The effects of over 30 years of warfare and almost a century of structural poverty and profound social, ethnic, geographical and gender inequities were plain to see in the situation of Central American children in the early 1990s. By way of example, the armed conflict in Guatemala orphaned 200,000 children, destroyed 440 villages and uprooted one and a half million people (PRODEN, 1996). The worst affected were indigenous children from the western altiplano. Aid programmes were so modest that government assistance amounted to less than one quetzal per child per year (IACHR, 1993).

At the regional level, in 2000 an average of 50.8% of the Central American population were below the poverty line and 23% were below the extreme poverty line (UNDP, 2003). The highest-income 10% of the population took between 29.4% and 40.5% of national income (UNDP, 2003). The severity of the situation varied from country to country, however, so it is worth examining some differences within the region at the start of the twenty-first century.

A dominant feature of Central America is the diversity of political and social contexts between one country and another, and the heterogeneity of their economic development. Thus, Costa Rica and Panama, which have traditionally enjoyed greater political stability, had the highest per capita GDP in 2000 (US$ 4,670 and US$ 4,450, respectively) and the best social conditions. Belize, El Salvador and Guatemala were in an intermediate position, with per capita GDP of US$ 3,940, US$ 2,350 and US$ 2,130, respectively, while Honduras and Nicaragua had the weakest economies, with figures of US$ 1,030 and US$ 790, respectively (World Bank, 2004), and very difficult social situations.

Economic growth in the countries does not automatically translate into social development, however. Thus, in 2000 the United Nations ranking of the Central American countries placed only Costa Rica and Panama in the group with a high Human Development Index value, while the remaining countries were in the medium human development group. In the two countries named, the social situation may have been helped by peace and political stability.

Within the region, Costa Rica was again ranked first in 2005, Panama moved up to second place, and Belize fell back significantly. As for the remaining countries, the position of Honduras worsened and that of Nicaragua improved slightly. The human development position of El Salvador was unvarying, despite strong growth in the country's economy (see table 1).

Table 1: Ranking of the Central American countries in the Human Development Index (HDI)[2]

Country	Year 2000	Position in the region (2000)	Year 2005	Position in the region (2005)
Belize	58	2	91	3
Costa Rica	48	1	47	1
El Salvador	104	4	104	4

[2] The United Nations Human Development Index places countries in a global ranking by their scores for health, education, economic, gender and environmental indicators.

Country	Year 2000	Position in the region (2000)	Year 2005	Position in the region (2005)
Guatemala	120	7	117	7
Honduras	113	5	116	6
Nicaragua	116	6	112	5
Panama	59	3	56	2

Sources: UNDP, 2000; UNDP, 2005.

The social indicators that are important for early childhood also reflect the different human development positions of the countries. This is illustrated by the mothers' and children's indices of the Save the Children (STC) 2005 global monitoring exercise. The mothers' index is constructed using the following indicators: lifetime risk of maternal mortality, use of modern contraception, births attended by trained personnel, prevalence of anaemia among pregnant women, female adult literacy and the participation of women in national government.

The indicators used to construct the children's index are infant mortality, gross primary school enrolment, access to safe water and the percentage of children under 5 with moderate or severe malnutrition. Guatemala and Belize are the countries with the lowest index values in the mothers' ranking. In the children's indices, Belize ranks last (89), below El Salvador (64) and Nicaragua (58).

Other data from the STC monitoring exercise show that Guatemala is the country with the highest percentage of illiterate adults (37%), followed by Belize, Nicaragua and El Salvador at 23%. The rate is slightly lower in Honduras, at 20%. Only in Panama and Costa Rica is the proportion below 10%. The highest rate of infant mortality, meanwhile, is found in Guatemala, where it is 35 per 1,000 live births. The situation is similar in Belize, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, with figures close to 30 children per 1,000 live births. Infant mortality rates are lower in Panama and Costa Rica (see table 2). The low ranking of Belize in the mothers' and children's indices stands in contrast to its intermediate economic development level, something which is perhaps indicative of an inequitable distribution of wealth.

Table 2: Country rankings for the STC Mothers' Index and Children's Index

Country	Adult female illiteracy rate (%)	Position in the Mothers' Index global ranking (out of 110 countries)	Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	Position in the Children's Index global ranking (out of 170 countries)
Belize	23	70	33	89
Costa Rica	4	12	8	27
El Salvador	23	45	32	64
Guatemala	37	72	35	38
Honduras	20	45	32	41
Nicaragua	23	40	30	58
Panama	8	22	18	36

Source: Prepared by Cefas Asensio on the basis of data from *State of the World's Mothers, 2005*, Save the Children.

This picture of modest progress with early childhood care and education confirms that Central America has not been able to leave its social failings behind it or keep up the pace of progress with human development seen in the first half of the 1990s, when armed conflict came to an end. The social advances that were being achieved in the fields of health and education were affected by economic slowdowns, some widening of inequity, environmental and social vulnerability, and a slow-moving democratization process (UNDP, 2003). There can be no doubt that the economic development model adopted in the region has contributed to this lack of progress (see box 1).

Box 1: Economic development tendencies in Central America

"Economic growth has been largely confined to the most dynamic areas of the economy. There is little linkage between this growth and some key areas of the production apparatus, such as traditional exports, small and medium-sized enterprises and the rural world. It is in the countryside, indeed, that the region is furthest from attaining its human development aspirations. The method chosen for confronting these challenges, an 'outward development' style centred on trade liberalization, has generated few social returns since the first impetus in the early 1990s."

Source: *Segundo Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano en Centroamérica y Panamá*, UNDP, Chapter 1, p. 1.

The case of El Salvador reveals the effects that an "outward" economic development model can have on the social situation of countries, and that of children in particular. In 1989, El Salvador began to implement an economic stabilization and structural adjustment plan that helped bring down the fiscal deficit and improve GDP growth. Despite the macroeconomic success of its adjustment plans, El Salvador's social investment was still lower in 2004 than in 1985 (Pleitez, 1995, in Janson and Barnen, 1997). In El Salvador, 43% of the population

are poor (UNDP, 2003). According to independent reports, poverty in El Salvador has been alleviated by the remittances of family members who have emigrated (FESPAD, 2005). As of 2002, 14.5% of the entire population of El Salvador were emigrants (ECLAC, 2006). Although it alleviates poverty, however, migration has severe consequences for the situation of children. In El Salvador, a large percentage of families are incomplete and a large proportion of children are cared for by older siblings (FESPAD, 2005). Migration as a percentage of the total population is also high in Guatemala (4.7%), Honduras (4.7%) and Nicaragua (9.6%), according to recent data from ECLAC (2006), and this compounds the difficulties of meeting the needs of families and children.

According to CRC follow-up reports, the social situation of children has been affected by social inequity, lower investment as a result of structural adjustment programmes, and the effects of natural disasters in the 1990s, particularly hurricanes Mitch and Stan and the El Salvador earthquakes of 2001 (see Annex 6).

Population growth in Central America is another source of pressure when it comes to early childhood care. In 2005, the region had a population of about 40 million, with an average growth rate of 2%. The average total fertility rate is 3.1 children per woman, with higher rates in Guatemala (4.38) and Honduras (3.53). Population growth is reflected by changes in the age structure and urbanization, both factors that influence the demand for public services. Thus, for example, the school age population of the region rose from 5.9 million in 1970 to 11.5 million in 2000 (UNDP, 2003).[3] Urbanization now averages 55%, with higher rates in El Salvador (60%) and Costa Rica (61%). The population of the region is forecast to reach 70.6 million by 2050, and the expectation is that social challenges similar to today's will persist (UNFPA, 2005).

The region's demographic trends not only provide a further explanation for the poor social situation of young children, but also suggest that the Central American countries will face strong pressure to expand education and health services in the near future.

[3] The population data do not include Belize.

II. The current state of ECCE

A. Initial education

1. Characteristics and organization

Initial education, defined as that provided to children aged 0 to 6, is recognized as a right in all the educational legislation of the region's countries. It includes formal school programmes and non-formal education programmes run by local organizations, non-governmental agencies and the public sector. It also includes parent education programmes. Programmes are divided into levels that correspond to the age of the children being taught. The initial level is usually intended for the 0 to 3 group and the preschool level for children aged from 4 to 6 or 7 (see Annexes 5 and 7). Each country organizes initial education differently and objectives also vary, as do the names of programmes, but some common tendencies can be observed.

a) The latter stage of initial education, which usually focuses on academic preparation for primary school and goes by the name of *preschool education*, is included in the basic education structure and is accordingly

The State has taken responsibility for regulating and overseeing certain aspects of the latter stage of initial education, whether this is provided in the public, private or community sector. However, there are a variety of unsystematized non-formal education programmes that are not coordinated with formal education systems.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that non-formal programmes sometimes have greater coverage than formal ones, are inexpensive and offer a fresh approach to comprehensive education.

Programmes with educational objectives, such as preparing children for primary school, coexist with welfare-type programmes whose functions may include providing food or health care or dealing with and preventing social problems.

In Costa Rica, El Salvador and Panama, the final phase of initial education has been made compulsory, indicating that initial education is now recognized as a children's right. This is no guarantee, however, of full coverage for the age group concerned.

Initial education teachers are offered (and required to undergo) specialized training, implying recognition of the special features that set this level of schooling apart from the rest. This policy cannot be fully enforced, however.

regulated by the general education laws governing its operation. This indicates a consensus in these societies that the State should be given responsibilities for regulating and supervising educational provision in early childhood, whether the provider is the public, private or community sector. It also implies recognition of the importance of initial education as the first level in the education system, irrespective of whether it is compulsory.

b) Responsibility for managing and organizing services is divided among a large number of institutions, both national and municipal. These include education, social welfare and family ministries, since programmes combine educational functions such as preparation for primary school with welfare-type functions such as food programmes, health care, and early measures to deal with and forestall social problems.

c) In three countries, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Panama, the final phase of initial education has been declared compulsory, indicating a determination on the part of governments to move more quickly towards universalization of this level and a recognition of the importance of initial education as a children's right. This decision stands in contrast, however, to the actual institutional capacity of the countries to offer full coverage at the initial level because, as will be seen later, nowhere except Costa Rica has enrolment at this level exceeded half the age group concerned. Compulsion is a recent measure. It was adopted in 1997 in Costa Rica, 1996 in El Salvador and 1995 in Panama. Although it has not ensured full coverage of the relevant population in these countries, the enrolment data do show that, other than in Costa Rica, this measure may have been effective in increasing the supply of one stage of initial education in the public sector by comparison with the private sector, something that will be analysed further on.

d) There are a variety of non-formal early childhood education programmes and facilities which are not coordinated with formal education systems or regulated by the State, and whose coverage and characteristics are little understood. This suggests that efforts need to be made to systematize the initial level and coordinate it with the rest of the education system. Anecdotal evidence collected in focus groups suggests, however, that the coverage of these programmes, while limited, exceeds that of formal programmes in most cases. Furthermore, these are inexpensive and very innovative programmes that bring to initial education a variety of models consistent with the comprehensive childhood education approach. Among the most striking features of these programmes are community participation and parent education, both

of which are crucial for expanding and sustaining initial education in a context where State resources are inadequate.

e) In most of the countries, initial education teachers are offered (and required to undergo) specialized training, implying recognition of the special features that set this level of schooling apart from the rest. Few countries can guarantee enforcement of this policy, however, owing to the shortage of specialized teaching staff and other factors associated with the remuneration of a teaching career, which will be analysed further on.

2. Coverage

Preschool education enrolment has seen modest growth of about 1% a year in the past decade (1990-2003), with higher figures in Guatemala and El Salvador. Costa Rica and Panama have tended to maintain existing coverage levels. In Nicaragua, Belize and Honduras, coverage remains very low despite the rise in enrolment.

Statistics on initial education coverage are difficult to analyse, owing to the variety of programmes and of the age groups to which each of them caters. These groups range from birth to 6, and education takes place in a wide range of settings, from the public sector to community establishments. Where the coverage of non-formal programmes is concerned, it has not been possible to obtain adequate information for the whole region. This is a major limitation of the report and one that needs to be remedied in subsequent studies, since a thorough understanding of initial education can only be reached by considering the statistics for all the different forms, including parent education. Non-formal types of education probably have the greatest coverage and the lowest cost and they enrich initial education with innovative approaches that are well worth analysing, considering the constraints on the ability of the State to provide this service to the whole of the relevant age group. Some of the characteristics and scope of non-formal programmes are described in the final section of this report. In the present section, however, coverage will be analysed only in the light of the enrolment data for programmes in the final phase of initial education, in both the public and private sectors.

The gross enrolment rate for preschool education in the region as a whole grew by about 1% a year between 1990 and 2003, which might seem modest progress considering that annual

population growth averaged 2% a year (see table 3). The age differences in the groups served limit the scope for drawing conclusions from this data, so a better approach is to analyse the coverage trend in each country.

At the beginning of the 1990s, gross preschool education rates in Costa Rica and Panama were above the Latin American average (43.6%), but by 2003 this was true only of Costa Rica (60.9%). In this period (1990-2003), Guatemala and El Salvador doubled their gross preschool enrolment rates, with Guatemala achieving coverage of just over half (55.2%) the relevant age group and El Salvador a little less than half (48.6%). Growth in the other countries varied: 15 percentage points in Nicaragua (27.7%), 5 points in Belize (28.8%) and just 3 points in Honduras (21.4%). In 2003, net enrolment rates ranged from 21% to 52% in a regional population of 5.3 million children in the 0 to 4 age group (see table 3).

These statistics confirm that preschool education enrolment has grown modestly over the past decade. Growth was highest in Guatemala and El Salvador. In Costa Rica and Panama, existing coverage levels have tended to hold steady. In Nicaragua, Belize and Honduras, coverage remains very low despite rising enrolment.

Table 3: Gross and net rates of preschool education enrolment, by sex, 2003

Country	Ages	Gross enrolment rate			Net enrolment rate			Girl/boy ratio in the GER	
		1990	2003	2004-6	1990	2003	2004-6	1998	2003
Central America		30.64	42.62						
Belize	3-4	23.2	28.8	-----	-----	27.8	-----	1.03	1.07
Costa Rica	4-5	61.7	60.9	-----	61.4	43.3	-----	1.02	1.02
El Salvador	4-6	21.0’	48.6	-----	-----	43.6	-----	1.05	1.06
Guatemala	5-6	26.0’	55.2	56.8*	-----	41.1	46.0*	0.99	1.01
Honduras	4-6	17.1’’	21.4	-----	-----	21.4	-----	….	1.05
Nicaragua	3-6	12.1	27.7	32.5*	-----	27.7	32.5*	1.02	1.03
Panama	4-5	53.4	55.8	-----	-----	52.0	-----	0.96	1.01
Reference figures for Latin America		43.6	60.9	-----	-----	50.6	-----	1.02	1.02

Source: Prepared by Cefas Asensio on the basis of data from *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006*, UNESCO, with data from 1990, 1998 and 2003, http://gmr.uis.unesco.org/.

’ 1991 data taken from: http://www.campus-oei.org/observatorio. Statistical reports from El Salvador and Guatemala, with reference to the UNESCO Statistical Yearbook, 1999.

’’ Statistics for 1990-1999. Secretaría de Educación/UNESCO, December 1999.

* 2005 data. Guatemalan Ministry of Education and Nicaraguan Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports.

It is important to note that the age from which initial education is provided could explain part of the differences in gross and net preschool enrolment rates (see table 3). It is striking that in Costa Rica, Panama and Guatemala, where preschool education is concentrated in the last two years, gross enrolment rates for 2003 were above 55% and net enrolment rates above 41%. Conversely, gross and net enrolment rates in Honduras and Nicaragua, which cater to a wider age range, are below 30%.

Looked at another way, the statistics reveal a relationship between the number of children entering the first year of primary school with a preschool education background and the decision taken by the country as to the age range at which early childhood education services are offered (see table 4). Thus, in countries where preschool education is provided in the two years before the first primary year (4/5 years and 5/6 years), the new primary school intake with a preschool education background is larger than in countries where this level is provided to a wider age range (3/4 to 6). It is interesting to note a slight tendency for girls to outnumber boys in the student population entering the first year of primary school with a preschool education background.

Table 4: New intake in first year of primary school with a preschool education background, 2003

Country	Ages	Rate for first year intake	Boys	Girls
Belize	3-4	-----	-----	-----
Costa Rica	4-5	85.1	84.8	85.3
El Salvador	4-6	-----	-----	-----
Guatemala	5-6	79.9	78.4	81.6
Honduras	4-6	-----	-----	-----
Nicaragua	3-6	38.9	37.6	40.3
Panama	4-5	61.0	59.6	62.6

Source: Prepared by Cefas Asensio on the basis of *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006*, UNESCO.

Regional coverage data for the 0 to 4 age range could not be consolidated. The information available suggests, however, that this coverage is low and is concentrated in extremely poor municipalities in the countryside or deprived urban areas. The contribution of non-governmental agencies to service provision for this age group is strong, in some countries

even surpassing that of the governmental sector in terms of scale and coverage, as was noted earlier.

A region that has not yet succeeded in overcoming its long-standing social problems can hardly be expected to attain high coverage in education services for children aged 0 to 4, so the efforts beginning to be made in this area are encouraging. As the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) notes, however, at a time when women are rapidly increasing their participation in the workforce, the ability to place their children in pre-primary teaching establishments is important both for them and for the future opportunities of these children, especially when the women concerned come from low-income households where the female contribution to the domestic finances can make the difference that lifts the family out of poverty (ECLAC, 2002-2003).

There is a slight tendency for girls to outnumber boys in the enrolment figures. In 2003, there were 101 girl students for every 100 boys, with a slightly larger difference in Belize (107), El Salvador (106) and Honduras (105). In the remaining countries the split between boys and girls is practically equal. This tendency can be observed in all educational subsystems. It would seem, therefore, that the gender inequities in initial education access discussed in earlier reports (Myers, 1995) are no longer so evident, at least to judge by the statistics examined. It is possible that a more careful review of these statistics that looked, for example, at differences between urban and rural areas, between indigenous and non-indigenous groups and between different socio-economic groups might bring such inequities to light. This is an aspect that should be included in future studies.

3. Efficiency

Where efficiency is concerned, promotion, drop-out and repetition rates were not identified for each level of preschool education. This information is needed to analyse the percentage of boys and girls remaining in the system without repeating a year, or repeating one or more times, and, most importantly, to compare the behaviour of the population that has a preschool education background with that of the population lacking this background, so that the returns on initial education investment can be assessed.

Some considerations concerning the efficiency of initial education in the region can be arrived at by observing the trend in the number of children who, having once entered the first year of primary school (with or without a preschool education background), then stay on right through to the final year, and by considering the total numbers dropping out, re-entering, and repeating years. The highest survival rates are seen in Costa Rica (88.4%), Panama (88%) and Belize (79.5%). In the remaining countries, survival rates vary from 60.4% (Guatemala) to 65.3% (El Salvador) (see table 5).

Repetition rates in the first and second years of primary school remain high. Preschool education seems to be no guarantee of success at the primary level as yet, possibly because its quality is too low.

Another possible way of gauging initial education efficiency is to analyse repetition rates in the first year of primary school. It must be remembered, though, that the first year repetition rate in Central America has fallen greatly in recent years, owing to the policy of automatic promotion to the second year. The risk of this policy is that it may make promotion to the second year too easy, something that cannot be determined from the repetition rate data. In any case, first year repetition rates range from 9.3% in Panama to 15.9% in El Salvador, Guatemala being a special case with a 27.6% repetition rate. These rates fall substantially in the second year. The repetition rates yielded by the data indicate that preschool education is no guarantee of success at the primary level as yet, possibly because its quality is too low. This seems to be particularly true of Guatemala, where the preschool enrolment rate has risen significantly over the last decade.

Where gender is concerned, the behaviour of repetition rates in the first year indicates that boys are repeating more than girls in all the countries of the region, with the sole exception of Honduras, where the repetition rates of boys and girls are identical (12%). Repetition rates in the second year are also slightly higher for boys than for girls.

Table 5: Repetition and survival rates in primary education, by sex.

Country	First year repetition rates			Second year repetition rates			Rates of survival through to final year of primary		
	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total
Belize	-----	-----	15.3	-----	-----	-----	80.5	78.6	79.5
Costa Rica	12.7	15.4	14.1	6.7	9.0	7.9	89.9	87.0	88.4

El Salvador	14.6	17.0	15.9	5.2	7.1	6.2	67.4	63.3	65.3
Guatemala	26.5	28.7	27.6	14.0	15.6	14.8	58.7	61.9	60.4
Honduras	12.0	12.0	12.0	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
Nicaragua	14.2	16.7	15.5	7.6	10.3	9.0	66.5	61.4	63.9
Panama	7.9	10.6	9.3	6.9	9.5	8.3	89.3	86.8	88.0

Sources: *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006*, UNESCO, with data from 2003.

4. Quality

The quality of initial education programmes is the most complex aspect to evaluate. From education ministry documents it can be inferred that the intention of governments is to implement initial education programmes that follow a comprehensive approach. This can be appreciated from the way they present their learning objectives and teaching methodologies for this level (see table 6). Guatemala seems to be an exception, since its objectives focus mainly on academic aspects and preparation for school. This is an issue that requires further analysis, however, entailing a careful review of the curriculum content developed as part of the education reforms of the 1990s and its implementation in practice.

Table 6: Initial education goals and methodologies in Central America

Country	Objectives	Methodologies
Belize	Fully develop childhood capabilities to enhance future learning and educational potential.	Education in a high-quality child-centred environment
Costa Rica	Foster children's all-round development from birth until they enter the first stage of basic general education.	Use of play
El Salvador	Adequate, varied resources to foster bio-psycho-motor, socio-affective, intellectual and communicational development.	Use of play work
Guatemala	Preparation for school and bilingual education. Create learning skills.	
Honduras	Preparation for school and capabilities training. Development of different forms of intelligences.	

Nicaragua	Develop children physically, intellectually, emotionally and morally by instilling appropriate and significant attitudes, knowledge, capabilities, skills, values and habits that are conducive to all-round development.	Learning by doing over different levels
Panama	Use of cultural knowledge to train children's capabilities. Being, understanding, doing and sharing.	

Source: Prepared by Cefas Asensio on the basis of education ministry documents.

Teaching personnel are now the most problematic aspect of initial education quality in Central America. As was pointed out earlier, initial education requires specialized professional knowledge, pedagogic techniques that differ from those used in primary school, and teaching and learning resources that are appropriate to early childhood. Special curricular content has been created for initial education in most of the countries, and special training syllabuses have been developed for teachers at this level. In many cases, however, those carrying out preschool education have no professional training.

A teaching career is not an attractive option in Central America owing to low pay, poor working conditions and the low social status of the profession. The average salary of qualified teachers in El Salvador was US$ 690 a month in 1999 (PREAL, 2002). In Guatemala, a primary school teacher earns an average of US$ 560 a month (PREAL, 2002a). In Honduras, a primary school teacher had a starting salary of US$ 255 a month in 2004 (PREAL, 2005). The most striking case is Nicaragua, where qualified teachers working with preschool children were paid an average of US$ 100 a month in 2005; educators in community preschool establishments, which are the majority in the country, only receive financial support of some US$ 12 a month, usually paid late (CODENI, 2004).

There are estimated to be 39,800 teachers working in preschool education in Central America (see table 7). The vast majority of these are women. Possibly this may be advantageous to children, since there is a widespread belief that women are better suited to the care of infants. There are no studies from the region to disprove or confirm this belief, however. As part of efforts to improve early childhood education, it would be well worth exploring the incidence that the sex of preschool teaching staff may have on children's educational and social performance.

Guatemala is the country with the largest number of preschool teachers: 17,000 in total, giving a ratio of 23 children per teacher (see table 6). The highest pupil-teacher ratio is found in Nicaragua, with an average of 25. The average for the region is 21 pupils per teacher, which is high considering that children under 6 require personalized attention, particularly when the teaching day lasts more than three hours.

Classroom time in preschool education ranges from 14 hours a week in Costa Rica to 30 hours a week in El Salvador (see table 7). On the face of it, this suggests the latter country is better placed; for a better assessment of this indicator, however, it would be necessary to analyse the use of classroom time and the type of activities children are involved in.

Table 7: Preschool teaching staff indicators

Country	Preschool teachers		Average classroom hours a week	Pupil/teacher ratio	Qualified teachers (%) 2002-2003
	Total	% Women			
Belize	200	99.0	-----	18	68
Costa Rica	5,600	96.0	14	18	79
El Salvador	-----	-----	30	-----	-----
Guatemala	17,000	-----	17	23	-----
Honduras	6,300	-----	-----	19	-----
Nicaragua	7,200	97.0	20	25	30
Panama	3,500	97.0	25	20	54
Central America	39,800	-----	-----	21	

Source: Prepared by Cefas Asensio on the basis of data from *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006*, UNESCO.

All the countries have set a minimum level of professional training for initial education teachers. The training required varies from country to country; the higher the human development level of the country, the higher the training level required (see table 8). As was noted earlier, the existence of minimum prerequisites for teaching at this level suggests that the countries have made progress in recognizing its special characteristics. Almost none of the countries, however, has succeeded in creating a corps of preschool education teachers who meet these requirements.

Table 8: Initial training required to teach at the preschool level

Country	Preschool teaching requirements and initial training characteristics
Costa Rica	University qualification (general degree, BEd, honours degree). These courses last two years in the case of a general degree (*diplomatura*), four years in the case of a BEd degree (*bachillerato en educación*) and five to six years in the case of an honours degree (*licenciatura*). Preschool teachers are university-trained.
El Salvador	Nursery teacher's diploma. The nursery teaching course lasts three years and an honours degree in education sciences (*licenciatura en ciencias de la educación*) with a nursery teaching specialization lasts five years. Nursery teachers have traditionally studied at teacher training colleges and pedagogic institutes, but in recent years they have trained at universities. It is estimated that 56.5% of nursery teachers have teaching diplomas and 10.2% are honours graduates. Among initial education teachers working with children aged 0 to 3, just 1.6% have a teaching diploma, 38.1% are secondary school graduates, 28.6% have completed the third cycle of basic education and 25.4% have gone no further than the sixth year of primary school.
Guatemala	Preschool education teacher's diploma. This is awarded after an intermediate-level training course provided in teacher training colleges. It includes two years of upper secondary education and science, humanities and psychopedagogic disciplines in addition to teaching practice. Since 1993, a bilingual preschool teaching qualification has also been available.
Honduras	Primary teaching diploma with specialization in preschool education. Primary teaching courses last three years and the nursery specialization a further three. Preschool training is of intermediate level and is provided at teacher training colleges. At present, a large percentage of practising teachers have only a primary teaching diploma but have been authorized by the Ministry of Education to work at the preschool level while they carry out further training.
Nicaragua	Primary education diploma (*maestro de educación primaria*) or BEd to teach in the formal system. Approved primary (*primaria aprobada*) diploma for the non-formal system. Primary education diploma courses are provided at teacher training colleges and last three years for general studies and two years for specializations. Preschool education graduates (*licenciados en educación preescolar*) and people taking related courses at universities can also teach in the formal system.

Country	Preschool teaching requirements and initial training characteristics
Panama	Honours degree in education (*licenciatura en educación*) with emphasis on preschool teaching, preschool teaching diploma (*diploma de profesor de preescolar*) or primary education diploma with preschool certificate (*diploma de maestro de educación primaria con título de preescolar*). This training is provided at universities and teacher training colleges, which have had non-university higher education status since 1999. Teacher training colleges were formerly intermediate-level institutions. Training lasts three to four years in both types of institution.

Source: Prepared by Cefas Asensio using information from education ministries and the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI).

5. Financing

Public investment in education represents 4% of GDP in the region. Only Costa Rica (5.2%) and Panama (4.6%) exceed this average (see table 9). This investment is clearly too low to meet national education needs, as can be inferred from the fact that the great bulk of education budgets go on teachers' pay. On average, pay accounts for 85% of education ministry budgets.

Table 9: Indicators of public investment in education in Central America

Country	Pay as a share of education spending (%)	Share of education spending by the public sector (%)		Public-sector education spending as a share of GDP (%)	
	2002	1998	2002	1998	2002
Belize	77.3			5.7	5.7
Costa Rica	-----	-----	80.2	5.4*	5.2
El Salvador	73.5	96.8	95.3	2.4	2.9
Guatemala	97.5	-----	-----	-----	2.5*
Honduras	-----	-----	-----	4.2	7.1**
Nicaragua	88.2	-----	90.8	3.0	3.2
Panama	86.0	96.1	96.5	5.3	4.6
Central America	-----		**91.0**	**3.7**	**4.0**

Source: *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006*, UNESCO.

* 1997 figure based on data from PREAL 2002.

** 2000 figure based on data from PREAL 2002.

*** 2004 figure based on data from PREAL 2005.

Teachers' pay is key to the stability of education systems, particularly in Honduras and Nicaragua, where educators' grievances periodically boil over into social conflict. However,

this extremely lopsided distribution of education ministry budgets leaves education systems no margin for equipping schools with basic resources such as teaching materials, books and appropriate learning environments.

The inadequacy of public investment in preschool education becomes clearer when the number of pupils taught at this level is considered. In 2000, the annual sums allocated per preschool pupil were US$ 232 in El Salvador and US$ 269 in Guatemala (see table 10). The per capita investment gap between preschool and primary school pupils is US$ 62 in El Salvador and US$ 88 in Guatemala. The most serious situation, however, is in Nicaragua, where public investment in preschool education was just US$ 5 per pupil in 2000—US$ 82 less than was invested per primary school pupil that year. More worrying still is the fact that this was much less than the 1995 level of US$ 20 per preschool student (PREAL, 2004). The situation in Nicaragua is partly explained by the fact that it is the country with the lowest per capita GDP in the region.

Despite all this, the case of Honduras is encouraging. The percentage of the education budget invested in preschool education increased from 1.2% in 1998 to 6.19% in 2003. That same year, El Salvador invested 7% of its education budget in preschool education (see table 10).

Table 10: Indicators of public investment in pre-primary education

Country	Preschool spending as a share of total national education expenditure (%)		Public spending per preschool pupil per year (US$)	Public spending per primary pupil per year (US$)	Private-sector share of preschool enrolment (%)	
	1999	2003	2000	2000	1998	2003
Belize	1	0			100.0	100.0
Costa Rica	-----	7			10.0	15.0
El Salvador	9	7	(c) 232	294	22.0	19.0 (a) 16.9
Guatemala	-----	-----	(c) 269	357	23.0	19.0
Honduras	(d) 1.2	(e) 6.19			-----	-----
Nicaragua	-----	1	(c) 5.1	87	17.0	(b) 6.0
Panama	3	2			23.0	18.0

Sources: USIS; *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006*, UNESCO.

(a) *Calidad, Cobertura e Impacto de la Educación Inicial y Parvularia en El Salvador*, MINED/ISNA/MSPAS/USAID, 2005.

(b) *Matrícula Inicial 2005 vs. 2004*, Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports.

(c) Informes de Progreso Educativo, PREAL. The Nicaragua figure is for 2002.

(d) 1990-1997 average taken from PREAL, 2005.

(e) PREAL, 2005.

There is little in the way of disaggregated information on public investment by education level, making it difficult to gauge how much is invested in initial education in the region at present. The information that is available suggests that the great bulk of the initial education supply comes from the public sector, so that families clearly depend on the State to provide this service.

The bulk of the initial education supply comes from the public sector. This supply is inadequate because public investment at this level is still very low. Public investment per preschool pupil tends to be lower than public investment per primary school pupil.

Only in Belize is the private-sector share of preschool enrolment 100%, and it would be worth studying this case more closely to see what lessons can be drawn for the other countries. Elsewhere, the share of the private sector ranges from 15% (Costa Rica) to 19% (Guatemala and El Salvador). In Costa Rica there is a tendency for the private sector to increase its share of the initial education supply, although this is a very recent development and private-sector participation is still the lowest in the region (see table 10).

Although it is the rural population that is worst affected by poverty in the region (see table 11), preschool education coverage is inadequate for this population, and this reinforces other forms of inequity and lack of opportunity in the education system.

Table 11: Poverty in Central America, by geographical area

Country	National (%)	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Belize	-----	-----	-----
Costa Rica	20.3	17.5	24.3
El Salvador*	42.0	30.0	46.0
Guatemala	60.2	45.3	68.0
Honduras	77.3	66.7	86.1
Nicaragua**	45.8	30.1	67.8
Panama	-----	25.3	48.5

Source: Prepared by Cefas Asensio on the basis of ECLAC, Social Statistics Unit, using special tabulations of household surveys from Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama. Reference year: 2002.
* *Mapa de Pobreza de El Salvador*, FISDL-FLACSO/Red Solidaria, CD-ROM. Reference year: 2003.
** *Perfil y Características de los Pobres en Nicaragua 2001*, Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (INEC).

Thus, for example, 57% of preschool education coverage in Nicaragua is rural.[4] In Guatemala, 41% of whose inhabitants are from the Maya, Garifuna and Xinca ethnic groups, the proportion of indigenous children in preschool education is 39%, which is not far short of their population share.[5] In Panama, it is poor children, and particularly those living in extreme poverty, who are least likely to receive preschool education, since whereas net coverage at this educational level is 47.6% for non-poor children, coverage for poor and extremely poor children is just 18.1% and 9.2%, respectively.[6]

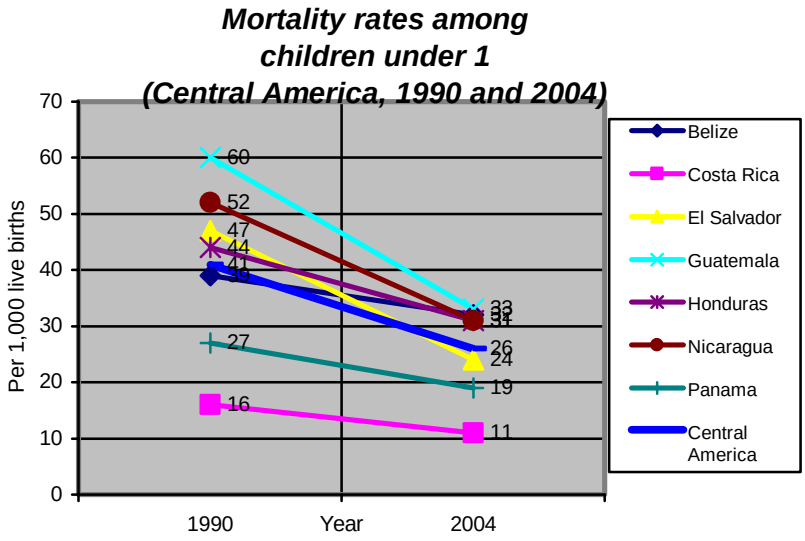
[4] See www.mecd.gob.ni, "Modalidades" section.
[5] *El Desarrollo de la Educación en el Siglo XXI*, national report of the Republic of Guatemala, Ministerio de Educación, June 2004, p. 18.
[6] *Perfil y Características de los Pobres en Panamá*, Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas, 1999, pp. 32 and 33.

B. Health and nutrition

1. Infant mortality

The region has made considerable progress in reducing mortality among children under 1. On average, this fell from 41 to 26 children for every 1,000 live births over the 1990-2004 period (see figure 1). Infant mortality rates in Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and Nicaragua are above the regional average, standing at between 31 and 33 per 1,000 live births. Although infant mortality in Guatemala has fallen considerably, it is still the highest in the region. Costa Rica and Panama are the best placed, with indices below the regional average. The greatest success story is perhaps El Salvador, as its infant mortality rate was formerly above the regional average at 47 per 1,000 live births, but had fallen by the end of the period to 24 per 1,000, below the regional average.

Figure 1: Incidence of infant mortality among children under 1

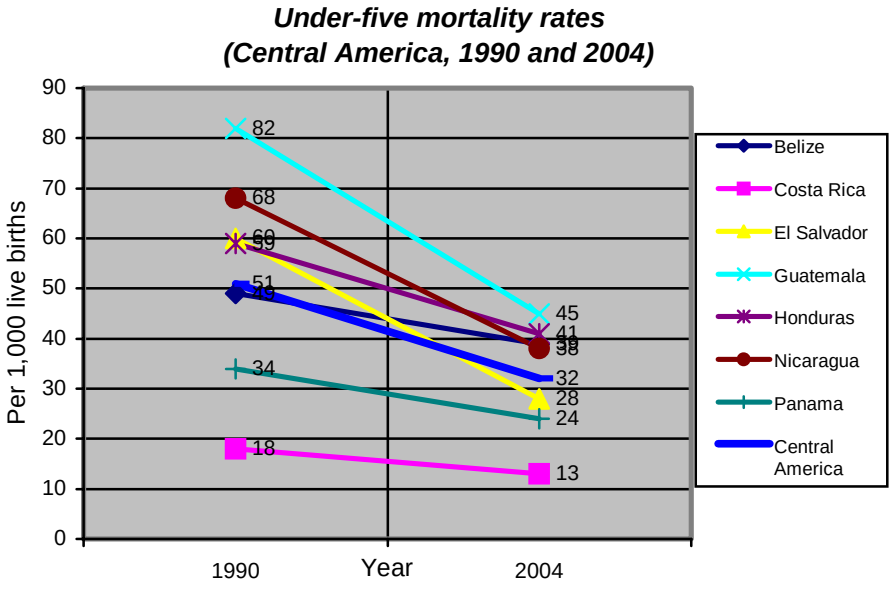


Source: Prepared by Cefas Asensio on the basis of data from *The State of the World's Children 2006. Excluded and Invisible*, UNICEF.

The region has also excelled in reducing mortality among children under 5 (see figure 2), with the average rate falling from 51 to 32 per 1,000 live births in the 1990-2004 period. The mortality rate for this age group remains high in Guatemala, however, at 45 per 1,000 live births. Belize, Honduras and Nicaragua have rates in excess of the regional average, while El

Salvador once again succeeded in moving over the period from the group with higher than average indices to the group that did better than the average, as its rate fell from 60 to 28 per 1,000 live births.

Figure 2: Under-five mortality rates (1990 and 2004)



Source: Prepared by Cefas Asensio on the basis of data from *The State of the World's Children 2006. Excluded and Invisible*, UNICEF.

2. Prenatal care and attended birth

Progress in reducing infant mortality in the region seems to be related to improvements in the care women receive during childbirth. It is well known that infant mortality is most likely to occur during labour, delivery or the postnatal period. The way childbirth is dealt with has changed in the region as a result of non-formal education campaigns.

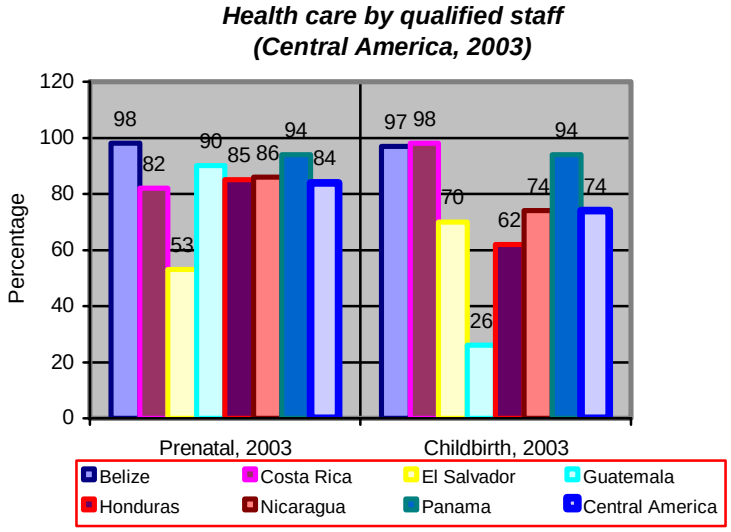
Infant mortality has been reduced from 41 to 26 per 1,000 live births, care during childbirth has improved and breastfeeding is on the increase. Nonetheless, nutrition levels are still very low, particularly among the children of the poor, and this is affecting the development of their educational potential.

Nonetheless, these indicators remain a cause for concern, the most pressing issue being the training of qualified health-care personnel capable of providing the necessary services and monitoring the condition of mothers and babies at the time of birth.

On average, 84 mothers out of every 100 receive health care from trained staff during the prenatal period. The statistics vary by country. One group that includes Belize, Panama and Guatemala has achieved rates of 90% for care of this type. Another group whose members are Nicaragua, Honduras and, surprisingly, Costa Rica has attained rates of between 82% and 86%. Bringing up the rear is El Salvador with a rate of 53%, well below the regional average.

As regards care by trained personnel during childbirth itself, the region has an average rate of 74%, which is lower than the percentage of women receiving prenatal care (see figure 3). For this indicator, the countries fall into three groups. The group with the highest coverage (94% and above) includes Panama, Belize and Costa Rica. Here, Costa Rica would seem to compensate for its low rate of specialized care at the prenatal stage. The second group contains El Salvador and Nicaragua, with averages of 70% and 74%, respectively. In Honduras the rate is 62%, which is below the regional average, even though it is the country which has mounted the largest number of campaigns to reduce maternal mortality. The situation is most alarming in Guatemala, where the rate is just 26%; this would seem to explain why the country has the region's highest rate of under-one mortality, with 33 deaths per 1,000 live births.

Figure 3: Prenatal and post-natal care (2003)



Source: Cefas Asensio, on the basis of *Gender, Health and Development in the Americas. Basic Indicators 2005*, PAHO-UNFPA-UNIFEM.

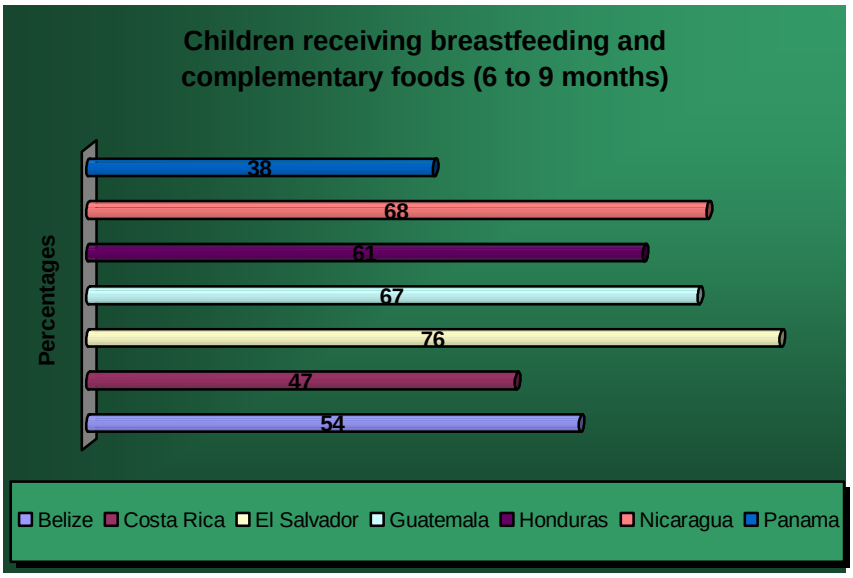
3. Breastfeeding

Campaigns to raise awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding have had positive effects in the region, as women are now breastfeeding for longer and institutional measures have been taken in many hospitals and health centres to encourage it from birth onward and prolong it for as many months as possible.

These campaigns are being sponsored by health and education ministries and those concerned with childhood and the family, with support from international organizations that work with children and with maternal and infant health, such as UNICEF, PAHO and Save the Children.

There is still a long way to go, however, as some health systems appear to have given greater priority to promoting and monitoring breastfeeding than others. Thus, for example, the countries where the largest percentages of children are breastfed (and breastfeeding is supplemented with complementary foods) for a period of 6 to 9 months are El Salvador (76%) and Nicaragua (68%), followed by Guatemala and Honduras (67% and 61%, respectively). It is not possible to make objective comparisons with Belize (54%), Costa Rica (47%) and Panama (38%), however, as their statistics are not up to date.

Figure 4: Breastfeeding in the first year of life (1996-2004)



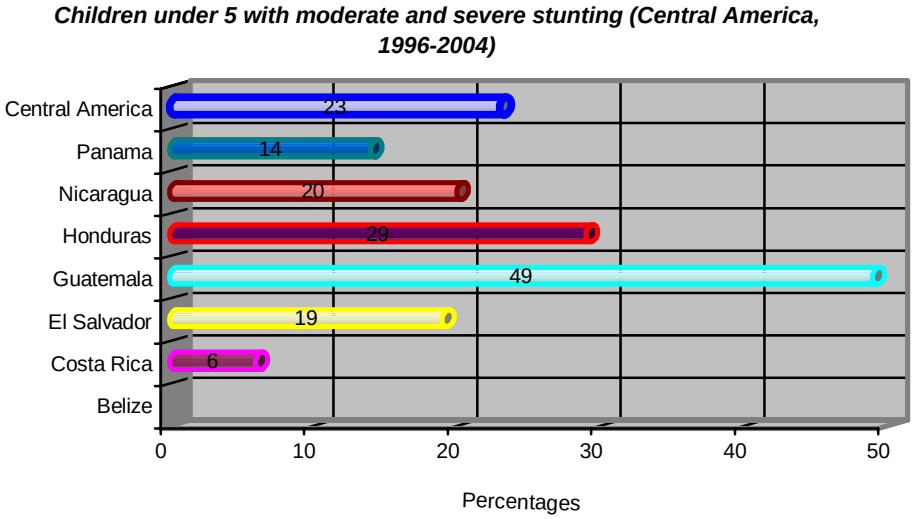
Source: Prepared by Cefas Asensio on the basis of *The State of the World's Children 2006. Excluded and Invisible*, UNICEF (data from the 1996-2004 period).

4. Nutrition

People's nutritional status in early childhood affects their performance in adult life, not only in education but also in the family, in society and at work. It also determines their prospects of surviving childhood illnesses. In 2005, an average of 23 out of every 100 children in Central America, or almost one in four, were moderately or severely stunted (see figure 4).

The most alarming case was Guatemala, where half of all children under 5 had nutritional problems, something that also accounts for the high rate of infant mortality in the country. In Honduras, meanwhile, almost one in every three children under 5 displayed these signs of malnourishment. In Nicaragua and El Salvador, the proportion was one in five children under 5. The levels reported for Panama and Costa Rica were below 14% and 6%, respectively.

Figure 5: Indicators of nutritional status among children under 5 (1996-2004)



Source: Cefas Asensio, on the basis of *The State of the World's Children 2006. Excluded and Invisible*, UNICEF.

C. Emerging problems

As was seen earlier, the situation of young children has improved thanks to a growing commitment by governments and societies to comprehensive education and care. The measures taken in the countries since the Convention on the Rights of the Child have contributed to the expansion of preschool services for the 4 to 6 age group, although educational investment as a share of GDP remains inadequate. Progress has also been made with infant mortality and attended childbirth. Despite this, the nutritional status of children under 8 remains worrying. Another cause for concern is the emergence of new problems affecting early childhood that have not yet received adequate public attention.

The number of AIDS sufferers is mounting in the region, particularly in Honduras, where some 3,900 children aged 0 to 14 were estimated to be living with the disease at the end of 2003 (UNICEF, 2006). Although the authorities are concerned about HIV-AIDS and it has begun to be a public health issue in the countries, it remains a little-known problem and the statistical information available on it is still inadequate.

The right to a name and nationality, which is exercised by registering children at birth, is also an increasingly evident cause for concern. This issue has not yet been taken seriously enough in the countries, however, with the exception of Nicaragua, where national campaigns have

succeeded in increasing to 81% the proportion of children registered at birth (90% in urban areas and 73% in rural ones). Unregistered children are not recognized as persons, and are thus deprived of rights and public protection.

A very important issue is the right to special protection for children who are subjected to ill-treatment, abandonment, abuse, violence and child labour. The greatest cause for concern is child labour, which has been growing in the region as result of poverty and the financial constraints on government efforts to alleviate its social effects on children. The worst consequence of child labour is that minors cease to be viewed as such by society and are not protected by the comprehensive childhood care policies of governments.

III. Current ECCE policies

Under the influence of the CRC, the region's countries have formulated and adopted very far-reaching policies and plans that indicate a determination to extend State responsibilities for childhood protection and education. However, these policies and plans set ambitious targets that are not matched by the financial and institutional capacity of the countries, so there can be no guarantee of implementation and progress.

The CRC has injected a new and promising dynamism into early childhood care and education in Central America. Striking progress has been made with legislation and with the adoption of policies grounded in a more comprehensive approach to childhood care and education. The situation of children aged 0 to 6 remains very critical, however; it is most acute in poor families, in the countryside and among indigenous people and immigrants. A great deal of work remains pending on the early childhood agendas of governments and civil society. It is in this context that current policies need to be analysed.

This chapter looks at the main early childhood care and education policies and strategies adopted by governments in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. It also describes some programmes that were mentioned in the focus groups conducted for this study as offering an innovative approach to comprehensive early childhood care and education.

A. Current policies

1. El Salvador

Two major policies for early childhood have been approved in El Salvador. One is the comprehensive childhood care envisioned by the National Policy for the Comprehensive Development of Children and Adolescents (Política Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y Adolescencia (PNDINA)). The other is the universalization of nursery education, with priority for 6-year-olds, mandated by the National Education Plan 2021 (Plan Nacional de Educación 2021).

Comprehensive development of children and adolescents was adopted as a national policy when the country acceded to the CRC. The Government of El Salvador had been implementing a variety of childhood-related initiatives since the early 1990s, but it was only in 2001 that this comprehensive policy approach was officially announced, superseding the pre-Convention "irregular situation" doctrine.

The National Policy for the Comprehensive Development of Children and Adolescents enshrines a multisectoral commitment to children's rights to education; to all-round health; to culture; to a healthy environment; to protection from risks and threats; to recreation, rest and leisure; to personal safety; to an identity, name and nationality; to participation; to protection from drugs; and to protection from exploitation for sexual purposes or as workers. The policy includes lines of action for the different areas of government involvement. In the legal sphere, for example, it establishes mechanisms for comprehensive protection, social oversight of rights, integrated basic social services for children and adolescents, social management, and social communication (Secretaría Nacional de la Familia).

The aspects included in the PNDINA tally with those identified by the CRC. They are all important and promising areas. The view of local actors, however, is that the implementation arrangements rely on a complex, bureaucratic system that makes the policy difficult to apply in practice (RIA, 2004). Certainly, the PNDINA names the National Secretariat for the Family as its overseeing authority and the Salvadoran Institute for Childhood and Adolescence (Instituto Salvadoreño para la Niñez y la Adolescencia (ISNA)) as the coordinator of a variety of implementing bodies (ISNA, 2004). In addition to its coordination

work, ISNA has executive functions, as it is responsible for initial education centres: child welfare centres (*centros de bienestar infantil*), child development centres (*centros de desarrollo infantil*), early care centres (*centros de atención temprana*) and protection homes (*hogares de protección*). Entrusting such a variety of functions to ISNA, an institution with few financial or human resources, complicates policy implementation.

Again, when the budget allocated to ISNA is considered, El Salvador's comprehensive childhood care policy looks ambitious. With the ISNA budget at its current level, for example, initial education programmes can only reach 1.18% of the population aged 0 to 3 (RIA, 2004). The ISNA budget fell by 19% between 2001 and 2005 (ISNA, 2004). Nor does the policy seem to be contributing to gender equity. Girls make up just 40.8% of participants in initial education programmes (RIA, 2004).

One weakness of the policy is that it mingles strategies inspired by the comprehensive care philosophy with strategies grounded in the "irregular situation" doctrine, thereby fragmenting official dealings with children and sacrificing unity of action. For example, the policy provides for different measures to be applied to children who break the law, so that one and the same child may be subject to protection under one programme and punishment under another. The policy, then, does not go far enough in appropriating the comprehensive protection philosophy (RIA, 2004).

In relation to early childhood education, the National Education Plan 2021 recognizes that *"children's learning experiences from birth to 6 are crucial for improving their prospects of success in basic education"* (Plan Nacional de Educación 2021, pp. 20 and 21). It stresses children's need for all-round support and commits the Ministry of Education to expanding the formal education supply, with the support of communities. Similarly, it states that *"the essential goal of education is the all-round development of Salvadoran children—physical, emotional, social, moral and spiritual"* (Plan Nacional de Educación 2021, p. 13).

The National Education Plan 2021 lays down four priorities for implementation of the early childhood education policy: preparation prior to the first year of primary school; a healthy upbringing; and certification of education services in institutions.

Although the Plan gives priority to the goal of all children *"having at least one year's preparation before the first year of primary school"* (Plan Nacional de Educación 2021, p. 20), it does not neglect the 0 to 6 age range, proposing for this younger group, first, to *"implement awareness-raising and information strategies so that families and educational institutions adopt healthy child raising practices"*, thereby providing for the needs of the 0 to 3 group, and, secondly, to *"certify institutions, in order to identify and publicize advances in initial and nursery education coverage"* (Plan Nacional de Educación 2021, p. 21), thereby affirming the shared responsibility of the private sector and civil society for early childhood.

By prioritizing the spread of good teaching and learning practices, the Plan shows a commitment to education quality. There is also a commitment to effectiveness, as the Plan proposes to *"ensure that students acquire the skills they need to prepare them for life so that they can develop and act as well-rounded individuals, participating successfully in the family, the workplace and society"* (Plan Nacional de Educación 2021, p. 22).

In the interests of effectiveness, the Plan lays out a set of strategies designed to improve the conditions of education generally, such as: physical environments that favour learning; an institutional environment that fosters learning; capable, well-motivated teachers; a learning-centred curriculum. Lastly, it suggests that the competitiveness of initial education would be improved by access to technology and connectivity and by good management practices (Plan Nacional de Educación 2021, pp. 22-29).

The policy of universalizing nursery education in El Salvador is encouraging and sets an example to the other countries in the region. In itself, it represents a great step forward with children's rights. The problematic factor is financing. Despite the growth seen at this level in the last decade, over half (52%) of the age group concerned did not have access to nursery education in 2003 (RIA, 2004). El Salvador operates a neoliberal type of economic policy that constrains social spending, suggesting that educational investment, currently at 4% of GDP, is not going to increase very much. If this proves to be the case, most of the growth in nursery education will have to come from the private sector, which will have adverse consequences for equity.

2. Guatemala

Guatemala adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child as soon as it was ratified in 1990, since the country's 1985 Constitution states that a human rights treaty or convention takes precedence over national law. This sparked a debate in the country about children's rights which helped to undermine the welfarist approach in favour of a new conception of comprehensive protection for children and adolescents.

Besides this, two policies in particular have been beneficial for early childhood care and education in the country: the human capital investment included in the Poverty Reduction Strategy and the institutionalization of initial education mandated by the National Education Law passed in 1991.

Guatemala has also adopted a set of educational policies and principles aimed at improving the quality and relevance of national education, and these have influenced the early childhood education on offer. First, the 1991 National Education Law emphasizes pupils' all-round development, treating them as protagonists of the education process. Second, in view of the sociocultural characteristics of Guatemalan children, the Bilingual Education Department (Dirección General de Educación Bilingüe) was created in 1995, its main function being to promote and establish the new system of intercultural bilingual unitary education (Nueva Escuela Unitaria Bilingüe Intercultural) (Ministry of Education).

Similarly, the national strategy for educational transformation (Estrategia Nacional de Transformación Educativa) adopted as part of the 2005-2008 education policy provides for implementation of an improved teaching curriculum, the use of technology in teaching, the building and refurbishment of infrastructure, the creation of a teaching career structure and an emphasis on civic values. The Government's objective is to double the 2003 education budget by 2008. It has also set itself the goal of attaining 75% preschool education coverage by 2008 (Ministry of Education).

Taken together, these policies bespeak a determination to improve early childhood education. In practice, however, their administration has involved uncoordinated one-off measures that are unsustainable in the medium term (Argueta, 2005). The most problematic factor is that

their implementation has relied heavily on international lending. The conditions laid down by the financing agencies have resulted in private-sector groups being engaged in the country to take over the functions of the State, chiefly at local level, and this has weakened efforts to decentralize the school system and transfer educational responsibilities to municipal authorities (Argueta, 2005).

Another problematic development has been the growth in private-sector provision of education services contracted out by the State. In 2003, the private sector accounted for 20% of pre-primary enrolment (Ministerio de Educación, 2004). This has introduced social and economic stratification into the system, so that the best-quality education is provided by the private sector to sections of the urban middle class, while lower-quality public provision is largely confined to the impoverished indigenous population of the countryside (Argueta, 2005). It is for this latter group that the bilingual and nursery categories of preschool education are provided.

Again, arrangements for involving civil society in policy formulation and implementation have favoured a business-centred approach to education and efficiency-oriented reforms, largely excluding indigenous groups and hindering the creation of public outlets for democratic expression (Argueta, 2005).

Food security is another policy intended to benefit small children. In September 2005, Guatemala adopted a National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (Política Nacional de Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional) in view of the fact that it had the worst record on under-five nutrition of any Central American country, with one in two children in this age group suffering from chronic malnutrition. Children of this age are part of the population targeted by the policy, whose aim is to ensure the availability, quality and prompt accessibility of the nutritious foods that are needed.

It is very evident that a heightened awareness of early childhood is now developing in Guatemala. This has generated new policies, and favourable initiatives and strategies can be expected in the future. Given the deterioration of indicators relating to education and to childhood in general, however, it will be necessary to monitor and support the implementation of these policies to ensure they achieve the hoped-for impact.

3. Honduras

Since acceding to and ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the country has made major legal and institutional efforts to improve the lot of the youngest children (UNICEF, 2006). The Childhood and Adolescence Code (Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia) was approved in 1996, and this was followed later by ratification of ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour and of the optional protocols to the CRC on the commercial exploitation of children and the involvement of children in armed conflict.

Concerning early childhood care, the most important step was the 1997 creation of an independent specialized agency, the Honduran Institute for Children and the Family (Instituto Hondureño de la Niñez y la Familia (IHNFA)), which institutionalized care for children. Unlike El Salvador, however, the country does not have a policy document to spell out its vision, goals and priorities for childhood care and education. Instead there is the Social Policy Action Plan (Plan de Acción de la Política Social), which is supposed to be implemented through three working plans. The first of these is oriented towards education and culture, pre-basic education being the priority. The second plan gives priority to the building of schools and health centres. The third concerns social protection networks and cross-cutting issues such as decentralization and gender equity (UNICEF, 2006).

According to local actors, childhood policies in Honduras are more in the nature of government policies than State policies (COIPRODEN, 2005). The current situation of the IHNFA is evidence for this. The IHNFA is an institution similar to the ISNA in El Salvador. The programmes in its charge include both social protection and the rehabilitation of young offenders, and this fragments official dealings with children to the detriment of the comprehensive care philosophy. Its functions also include coordination, promotion, execution and oversight of public policies for children and families. Despite the importance of its functions, the IHNFA has had to survive, without power or resources, in the face of demands for its abolition. The coverage of its programmes is very low. For example, it is managing to cover just 2.7% of children at social risk or in the street (COPRODEN, 2005). This is very serious, considering that 66% of the population aged 0 to 14 in the country is below the poverty line (COIPRODEN, 2005).

The most important educational policy instrument is the Honduran Education for All (EFA-FTI) Plan. The general objective of the Plan is that all Honduran children should complete six full years of basic education. The measures proposed to achieve this are the universalization of pre-basic education, enforcement of compulsory attendance in basic education, better teaching and learning quality, and support for educational centres to ensure the targets are met. The Plan goals also incorporate those of the Poverty Reduction Strategy relating to pre-basic and primary school coverage, but make them more stringent.

Honduras was one of the first countries in the world to be selected for a programme of international financing to pursue the EFA goals. This historic opportunity does not seem to have been capitalized upon. When progress was reviewed, the donor community expressed its concern about leadership and communication shortcomings in the implementation of the programme and about the opposition of the teachers' organization to some of the measures (PREAL, 2005).

In view of this background, it is reasonable to think that the problem in Honduras lies not so much in the substance of policy as in the country's organizational and financial capacity to implement it. In the case of financing, it is not just the sheer amounts involved that complicate policy implementation. Indeed, the Ministry of Education has been given a substantial budget increase in recent years. At 7.1% of GDP in 2000, educational investment is higher in Honduras than in any other Central American country (PREAL, 2002). This increase, however, has gone to fund the pay increases agreed to by the government with the teachers' unions.

4. Nicaragua

Nicaragua has produced a National Policy and Plan for the Comprehensive Development of Children and Adolescents (Política y Plan Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia), based on the children's rights enshrined in the Convention. The body that coordinates implementation of this policy is the National Council for Children and Adolescents (Consejo Nacional de Atención a la Niñez y la Adolescencia (CONAPINA)). The Plan contains a set of multisectoral commitments relating to health, nutrition, education, special protection and child participation. There are other public policies designed to

strengthen the framework for early childhood strategies and actions, including the food and nutritional security policy, the population and development policy and the educational participation policy. All these policies are part of the National Development Plan (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo (PND)), which is the government's main administrative instrument.

As regards education policy, since 2001 the country has had a National Education Plan (Plan Nacional de Educación (PNE)) whose objectives, strategies and actions are oriented towards 2015. The Plan is operational and provides a framework for current education policies; it is already undergoing its first in-depth review, however, led by the National Education Forum (Foro Nacional de Educación) and involving specialists from the different educational subsystems, which has already produced a set of proposals for revising and updating the Plan.

The PNE is a policy instrument favourable to early childhood education. Its strategy for expanding coverage is to establish new sources of educational supply, in accordance with the economic potential of the different territories; to use the community model to increase preschool coverage; to continue and extend the "glass of milk" and "school meals" programmes for the poorest children; and to support prenatal care and calorie- and protein-rich nutrition for children aged 0 to 4.

In summary, the policies and plans put in place in Nicaragua indicate the country's intention to improve early childhood care, expand initial education services and extend preschool education coverage to at least the year before primary school. Some of the programmes adopted, such as the Social Protection Network (Red de Protección Social), bespeak an effort to adopt the comprehensive childhood care philosophy (see the description of innovative projects). The conditions for moving away from the irregular situation philosophy appear more favourable here than in Honduras and El Salvador, since juvenile gangs have less of a presence. While policies and programmes exist, though, it would seem that the country has only a limited capacity to implement them and that early childhood care and education has not been given high enough priority on the social agenda.

The greatest strains where policy implementation is concerned are found in the area of preschool education and concern financing, quality and institutionalization. At 3.2% of GDP in 2002 (see table 9) educational investment in the country is low in relative terms, and it is even lower in absolute terms, since Nicaragua's economy is the smallest in Central America

(PREAL, 2004). Underfunding of education has left the preschool level with very little in the way of resources. Because preschool education is not compulsory, most of its financing has to come from outside resources, and this has exacerbated its instability and lack of independence. It has been possible to expand coverage at this level thanks to the work done by women volunteers at community centres, most of whom, however, do not have professional teaching qualifications, so that there are no minimum quality guarantees. Again, unlike the other Central American countries, Nicaragua has not fully institutionalized preschool education as part of the education system, nor is this one of the country's national social development priorities; for example, there are no targets for this in the National Development Plan, and it is not included in the formal basic education system as defined by the recently passed General Education Law.

B. Innovative projects: inputs for an incidence model

As was pointed out earlier, development during early childhood requires different forms of support in different areas, from health care and nutrition to preparation for primary school. Consequently, a comprehensive approach to early childhood care should take account of the variety of needs of children under 6, the different context in which this support is required and the multiplicity of actors that should be involved with it.

There is no one model for comprehensive early childhood care and education. A preliminary inventory of projects identified as innovative by the organizations consulted,[7] however (see tables 1 to 5), suggests some characteristics that a comprehensive early childhood care and attention incidence model ought to include.

Community participation, to make up for the limited intervention capacity of the State and to develop a local culture of shared responsibility for children's social and educational rights. The case of EDUCO in El Salvador seems to offer useful lessons in this area.

[7] The tables describing the programmes were prepared by the authors from material in the public domain and information collected in focus groups in El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Parent education, so that families are apprised of new ways of viewing childhood and of educating and caring for children. The experience of the Christian Children's Fund with the Madres Guías (Guide Mothers) programme in Honduras is a particularly striking example.

Priority for the rural and indigenous sector, in recognition of the fact that childhood care and education needs are greatest among the poorest, most of whom, in Central America, live in ethnic communities and the countryside. The CENACEP programme in Guatemala is an example of this type of incidence.

Attention to health and nutrition, because these are a precondition for the overall development of small children, as well as being a social right bestowed upon them by the new children's legislation in the countries. The School Nutrition Programme (Programa de Nutrición Escolar) and the Social Protection Network (Red de Protección Social) in Nicaragua yield important knowledge about this area of intervention.

Free, relevant, high-quality preschool education, to put small children from disadvantaged sections of society in a better position to enter, remain and succeed in the formal education system. It is essential that these programmes be free of charge to forestall any risk of inequity arising from the financial situation of families. Relevance refers mainly to the guarantee of a preschool education that is conducted in children's mother tongue and is appropriate to their cultural circumstances. Quality concerns the focus of the syllabus and the appropriate selection of learning resources. The PAIN programme in Guatemala and the PREPI programme in Honduras have this orientation.

Transition education, to ensure continuity between the specific pedagogy and education syllabus of the preschool level and the first and second years of primary school, since children at this latter level are still in the closing stages of their early childhood development. Save the Children's RICA is a unique example of this in Central America.

1. El Salvador

Name	Sponsor/partners	Goals	Design	Results
Education for the Community (Educación para la Comunidad (EDUCO))	Ministry of Education and parents	• Expand the coverage of nursery education in rural areas, with community involvement • Coordinate the nursery and basic education curricula • Improve pupils' nutritional status • Train parents in caring for children	A Communal Education Association (Asociación Comunal de Educación (ACE)) composed mainly of parents signs an agreement with the Ministry of Education and Sports, which provides funds that the community then spends on preschool and/or basic education. The ACEs select and recruit teachers.	Started up around 1991 for preschool and first year primary. Now goes right through to seventh year.
Child Welfare Centres (Centros de Bienestar Infantil (CBI))	Instituto Salvadoreño de Protección al Menor (Salvadoran Institute for the Protection of Minors)	• Provide initial education from early childhood	A free child care and education service from birth onward. Each centre is run by a mother from the community.	
Aprendamos juntos ("Learning together")	Fundación Ágape	• Comprehensive education from 0 to 3	Early stimulation centres in rural areas, including health services and parent education	Catering to 400 children since 2000.

2. Guatemala

Name	Sponsor/partners	Goals	Design	Results
Core national pre-primary curriculum (Currículo Nacional Base de Pre-Primaria)	Ministry of Education	• Establish a new curriculum that reflects the development stages of children aged 0 to 6 and the cultural wealth of the country	This is a flexible curriculum that can easily be adapted to different contexts. It is now at the stage of consultation with teachers.	
Centres for Community Learning in Preschool Education (Centros de Aprendizaje Comunitario en Educación Preescolar (CENACEP))	Ministry of Education and UNICEF	• Ease entry to the first year of primary school • Involve the community in preparation work • Foster shared democratic values and interculturalism	This is an accelerated 35-day preparation for children from different ethnic backgrounds who have not had access to preschool education. It is provided from the age of 6, in the three months running up to the start of the school year. Hours vary depending on the needs of the community and the availability of volunteers. In bilingual areas, the intercultural bilingual format is offered. Between 35 and 40 children are taught at each centre.	• From its beginnings in 1994 the project has expanded steadily so that it now covers the whole country. • Repetition and drop-out rates have fallen in places where they were formerly a problem. • Pupils who have gone through the programme have become better adapted socially and improved their academic performance at primary school.
De la mano edúcame ("Lead	Ministry of Education and	• Prepare families, from pregnancy onward, to provide comprehensive care	This is a non-school programme run by volunteers from the community. It includes the	• It is being implemented in 20 communities in 12 of the

me by the hand")	international agencies such as UNICEF	to under-sixes • Provide mother-tongue early childhood education in the home and in the presence of the family	whole family, beginning at pregnancy and continuing until the child is 2. People are attended to individually and in groups by means of home visits. The programme is free. It is provided in rural communities lacking in education services for children under 6.	country's departments, with coverage of 3,205 children and 677 families.
Comprehensive Care Project for Children Aged 0 to 6 (Proyecto de Atención Integral al Niño y la Niña de 0 a 6 Años (PAIN))	Ministry of Education in coordination with Ministry of Health and with UNICEF support	• Extend initial education in the country's different language communities • Enlist the community in efforts to improve the lot of children under 6	This is a centre-based programme of care for expectant and breastfeeding mothers and for children aged 0 to 6. The 0 to 3 group is provided with early stimulation and the 4 to 6 group with pre-primary education.	• Coverage of 17,785 children under 6, with a tendency for centres to expand.

3. Honduras

Name	Sponsor/partners	Goals	Design	Results
Madres Guía (Guide Mothers)	Christian Children's Fund	• Mother and infant care and early stimulation from 0 to 4 • Development of community involvement in early childhood care	A group of mothers, chosen for their leadership qualities, are trained for two months in basic health, nutrition and child development techniques. Each is then allocated a group of families (maximum of five) for which she becomes the Guide Mother, developing a programme of mother and infant orientation and early stimulation for children aged 0 to 4. Orientation is provided by means of home visits	

			twice a week.	
Interactive Pre-basic Education Project (Proyecto de Educación Prebásica Interactiva (PREPI))	Fundación Ricardo Maduro, FEREMA	• Expand pre-basic education through Community Pre-basic Education Centres (Centros Comunitarios de Educación Prebásica (CCEPREB)).	This is an alternative method of preschool education in premises made available by the community and run by volunteers. The centres use the Juego y Aprendo ("play and learn") programme, which consists of 108 audio programmes recorded on CDs, with supporting illustrations and exercise books. The educator receives training and a monthly payment from municipal mayor's offices, private businesses, NGOs or private individuals.	• Coverage of 2,632 centres attending to 40,000 children.

4. Nicaragua

Name	Sponsor/partners	Goals	Design	Results
National Strategy for Initial Education 2004-2014 (Estrategia Nacional de Educación Inicial 2004-2014)	Inter-institutional Commission for Initial Education (Comisión Interinstitucional de Educación Inicial), supported by the IBD, STC Norway and UNICEF	• Define the goals, principles, strategies and lines of action of initial education to ensure operativity in a system of intersectoral and inter-institutional coordination • Improve the initial education of children under 6	Public document containing plans, programmes and projects for children aged 0 to 6 to be implemented by public- and private-sector institutions. This is an integrated strategy relying for its implementation on the involvement of families, communities and society at large.	• The results expected from implementation include enhanced coverage, quality, equity, organization and family involvement, and improvements to information, planning, management, follow-up and evaluation systems.

Social Protection Network (Red de Protección Social)	Ministry of the Family, supported by the Ministry of Education	• Improve education, health and food security for rural families in extreme poverty	Families with a child enrolled between the first and fourth year of primary school and aged between 7 and 13 are provided with a school voucher (*bono escolar*) worth about US$ 90 a year; a "school satchel" (*mochila escolar*) consisting of a lump sum of US$ 25 a year for each child enrolled; a supplier incentive voucher (*bono a la oferta*) worth US$ 8 per pupil per year; and a food security voucher (*bono de seguridad alimentaria*) worth about US$ 207 in Phase I and US$ 145 in Phase II and conditional on children attending class. Preventive health-care and training services are also provided.	• School attendance and retention rates in the first years of primary school have improved.
Integrated School Nutrition Programme (Programa Integral de Nutrición Escolar)	Ministry of Education with the collaboration of Banco UNO.	• Improve the nutrition level of school-age children	Children are given three nutritious biscuits each day on school premises during the early hours of classes.	• Food supplement provided to 30,000 children 240 days a year in the municipalities with the country's highest poverty indices. • Improved class attendance.
School milk (Vaso de Leche Escolar)	Ministry of Education	• Improve the nutrition level of school-age children	Children aged 6 to 12 are given a nutritious glass of milk each day on school premises during the early hours of classes.	• Milk provided to 200,000 children at 1,271 schools. • Improved class attendance.

5. The Save the Children Regional Initiative for Central America (RICA)

Name	Sponsor/partners	Goals	Design	Results
Regional Initiative for Central America (RICA)	Rural communities in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua	• Increase access to quality early childhood development programmes that protect and promote young children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development • Decrease repetition and drop-out rates focusing on first grade and increase school success particularly in the first cycle of basic education (years one to three) • Strengthen community capacity to protect and promote early childhood development • Strengthen local, regional, national and global policies,	RICA is a regional model with one results framework and one programme monitoring plan, yet it is flexible in implementation to allow for adaptation to the local context and needs. RICA aims to support communities and families so that children grow up healthy and happy and are well prepared for the formal education system while working with teachers, schools and the education community to ensure that schools are ready to welcome young children, particularly in the first year of primary. The two main components are early childhood development (ECD) and transition education (TE). ECD interventions include parent	Increased first grade promotion rates for ECD programme graduates: 77% promotion rate regionally compared to 72% for non-ECD children. 4,092 children participating in ECD activities. 2,032 children participating in TE activities. Increased municipal support to ECD programming. Increased parent and community participation in education. Cost-effective model: one year of a child's participation costs from US$ 90 to US$ 150 depending on the country of implementation (based on an economic analysis of the RICA programme conducted in 2005).

		capacities and resources for early childhood development	education, direct attention to children in ECD spaces (centre-based, home-based or mobile spaces), mothers' clubs for women with children from birth to age 3, advocacy at the local level with municipal governments and close coordination with the health sector. TE interventions include summer clubs for parents and children to bridge the home or ECD experience to first year primary, classroom support for first year primary teachers to promote child-centred pedagogy,	

IV. Preliminary conclusions

The societies of Central America are slowly moving towards a new understanding of childhood and a new definition of children's social and educational rights. The influence of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is plain to see. However, the challenges involved in improving the situation of children in the region are huge. First, governments do not have enough financial, human and institutional resources to remedy the social failings inherited from almost three decades of armed conflict. Second, new problems related to the impact of poverty on children are now emerging, and these are increasing the unmet care and education needs of under-sixes.

Higher public investment in childhood care and education is vital if progress is to be made in this field. The contribution of international aid also needs to be maintained at current levels and the involvement of non-governmental organizations needs to increase substantially.

Government policies should be oriented towards creating the basic conditions for initial education, such as: training professionals to teach in initial education and inducing them to work at this level; expanding the supply of education for the most vulnerable sections of society; supervising and supporting non-formal programmes; and providing small children with the basic teaching and learning resources they need.

The contribution of non-governmental agencies should be focused on raising awareness of children's rights; organizing involvement by communities and parents in formal and non-formal initial education programmes; and then systematizing successful projects and sharing them with society, the government and the international community.

Lastly, the countries should move towards the adoption of State policies on early childhood care and education so that these will survive the terms of individual governments, help develop a medium-term approach to this issue, impact the culture of society and build sound institutions to uphold children's social and educational rights.

ANNEXES

Annex 1

Total population and population aged 0 to 9 in seven countries of Central America

Estimates for 2005

POPULATION INDICATORS	BELIZE	COSTA RICA	EL SALVADOR	GUATEMALA	HONDURAS	NICARAGUA	PANAMA	REGION
Total population	266,260	4,325,808	6,874,926	12,699,780	7,346,532	5,483,447	3,228,186	40,224,939
Urban population share	51.4%	62.6%	57.8%	50.0%	52.1%	56.9%	65.8%	55.3%
Rural population share	48.6%	37.4%	42.2%	50.0%	47.9%	43.1%	34.2%	44.7%
Population aged 0 to 4	32,903	387,549	806,048	2,036,312	998,795	730,911	342,945	5,335,463
Population aged 0 to 4 as share of total	12.4%	9.0%	11.7%	16.0%	13.6%	13.3%	10.6%	13.3%
Male share of population aged 0 to 4	50.7%	51.2%	51.1%	50.9%	51.0%	51.0%	51.1%	51.0%
Female share of population aged 0 to 4	49.3%	48.8%	48.9%	49.1%	49.0%	49.0%	48.9%	49.0%
Population aged 5 to 9	31,912	406,853	788,959	1,823,642	962,520	717,351	329,740	5,060,977
Population aged 5 to 9 as share of total	12.0%	9.4%	11.5%	14.4%	13.1%	13.1%	10.2%	12.6%
Male share of population aged 5 to 9	50.8%	51.4%	51.0%	50.6%	50.9%	50.9%	51.1%	50.8%
Female share of population aged 5 to 9	49.2%	48.6%	49.0%	49.4%	49.1%	49.1%	48.9%	49.2%
Population aged 0 to 9	64,815	794,402	1,595,007	3,859,954	1,961,315	1,448,262	672,685	10,396,440
Population aged 0 to 9 as share of total	24.3%	18.4%	23.2%	30.4%	26.7%	26.4%	20.8%	25.8%
Male share of population aged 0 to 9	50.7%	51.3%	51.0%	50.7%	51.0%	51.0%	51.1%	50.9%
Female share of population aged 0 to 9	49.3%	48.7%	49.0%	49.3%	49.0%	49.0%	48.9%	49.1%

Prepared by Cefas Asensio from the following sources:

Central American Population Centre (CCP), University of Costa Rica, http://ccp.ucr.ac.cr/observa/CAnacional/index.htm.

*Statistics and Census Bureau, Panama, http://www.contraloria.gob.pa/dec/Temas/50/40/Estimaciones.pdf.

The general projections were corroborated at: National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC), Nicaragua, http://www.inec.gob.ni/; National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC), Costa Rica, http://www.inec.go.cr/; National Institute of Statistics (INE), Guatemala, http://www.segeplan.gob.gt/ine/; National Institute of Statistics (INE), Honduras, http://www.ine-hn.org/; Statistics and Censuses Bureau, El Salvador, http://www.digestyc.gob.sv/.

In view of the limited information available from the region's statistics institutes concerning areas of residence, the urban and rural percentages were adjusted by the projections of the Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE), http://websie.eclac.cl/sisgen/Consulta.asp.

Annex 2

Children's legislation in Central America since the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Country	Current legal situation
Belize	The Families and Children Act was adopted in 1998. This was the first code to reformulate family rights as relating to children in the light of the CRC. Source: *La doctrina de la Protección Integral y las normas jurídicas vigentes en relación a la Familia*, Daniel O'Donnell, Mexico City, September 2004, http://www.iin.oea.org/anales_xix_cpn/docs/Ponencia_Conferencistas.
Costa Rica	The Childhood and Adolescence Code (Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia) was approved in January 1998. Prior to this, the Organic Law of the National Childhood Trust (Patronato Nacional de la Infancia) was adopted in 1996 and the Law for the Protection of Adolescent Mothers (Ley de Protección de las Madres Adolescentes) in 1997. Source: http://www.cinterfor.org.uy/public/spanish/region/ampro/cinterfor/temas/youth/legisl/c_rica/ii/index.htm. In March 2002, article 17 was reformed by Law 7739 on the right to protection of the best interests of minors of foreign nationality. Source: http://www.acnur.org/biblioteca/pdf/1834.pdf.
El Salvador	There is no comprehensive early childhood care law; the issue is legislated for by the Family Code, which was redrafted in 1994 in the light of the positions set out in the CRC. However, the *Balance de Cumplimiento de las Recomendaciones del Comité de los Derechos del Niño de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas (ONU) al Estado Salvadoreño 2004-2005* criticizes "the absence in El Salvador of a comprehensive childhood protection law". Sources: http://www.iin.oea.org/anales_xix_cpn/docs/Ponencia_Conferencistas; *La doctrina de la Protección Integral y las normas jurídicas vigentes en relación a la Familia*, Daniel O'Donnell; and www.alianzaportusderechos.org.
Guatemala	The Decree Law on Comprehensive Protection for Children and Adolescents (Decreto de Ley de Protección Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia) came into force following approval by the executive on 15 July 2003. Source: http://www.casa-alianza.org/es/index.php/site/documentos/derechos_de_la_ninez_derechos_humanos/ley_de_proteccion_integral_de_la_ninez_decreto_27_2003 The law dealing with adolescent law-breakers was also reformed in 2003. Source: http://www.cejamericas.org/doc/legislacion/gua-ley-proteccion-ninez.pdf.
Honduras	The Childhood and Adolescence Code (Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia) was approved in September 1996. Source: *Análisis de Situación*, UNICEF-Honduras, 2006, draft.

Country	Current legal situation
Nicaragua	Law 287, the Childhood and Adolescence Code (Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia), was approved on 24 March 1998. It was based on article 71 of the Constitution, which provides that the Convention on the Rights of the Child is fully applicable in the country. Source: http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/2887. The Law on Reforms and Additions to the Penal Code (Ley de Reformas y Adiciones al Código Penal de la República) was approved in 2004, in view of the need to improve implementation of the Childhood and Adolescence Code. Source: www.conapina.gob.ni/leyes%20nacionales/propuestas%20c%C3%B3digo%20penal%2025juniofinal%201.doc.
Panama	The regulations protecting children's rights are contained in different laws. The country does not have a childhood and adolescence code. Children's rights are protected in the national Constitution, the Family Code and other laws. Source: Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defence of Women's Rights (Colectivo CLADEM-Panamá), *Reporte sobre la Convención de los Derechos del Niño, 2004*, http://www.crin.org/docs/resources/treaties/crc.36/Panama_CLADEM_ngo_report(S).doc.

Annex 3

Specialized childhood care institutions created since the CRC

Country	Name of institution	Year of foundation
Belize	Ministry of Human Development, Women and Children and Civil Society	--
Costa Rica	Consejo Nacional de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (National Council for Childhood and Adolescence (CNNA))	1998
	Coordinadora de Organizaciones Sociales de Defensa de Derechos de los Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes (Coordinating Committee for NGOs Defending Children's and Adolescents' Rights (COSECODENI))	
El Salvador	Coordinadora para la Defensa de los Derechos del Niño (Coordinating Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the Child (CODENI))	1992
	Red para la Infancia y la Adolescencia (Network for Childhood and Adolescence (RIA))	1993
	Secretaría Nacional de la Familia (National Secretariat for the Family (SNF))	1989
	Instituto Salvadoreño para la Atención Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (Salvadoran Institute for the Comprehensive Care of Children and Adolescents (ISNA)), originally created as the Instituto Salvadoreño de Protección al Menor (Salvadoran Institute for the Protection of Minors (ISPM))	1993 1993
Guatemala	Coordinadora Institucional de Promoción de los Derechos de la Niñez (Institutional Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of Children's Rights (CIPRODENI))	1988
	Procuraduría de Defensa de Derechos Humanos/Defensoría de la Niñez (human rights/children's rights enforcement authority)	1995
	Comisión Nacional contra el Maltrato Infantil (National Commission against	1993

	Child Abuse (CONACMI))	
Honduras	Coordinadora Interinstitucional Pro Derechos del Niño y la Niña (Interinstitutional Coordinating Committee for Children's Rights (COIPRODEN))	1989
	Consejo Nacional de Atención a Menores Discapacitados (National Council for the Care of Disabled Minors (CONAMED))	1992
	Instituto Hondureño de la Niñez y la Familia (Honduran Institute for Children and the Family (IHNFA))	1992
Nicaragua	Federación Coordinadora Nicaragüense de ONG's que Trabajan con la Niñez y la Adolescencia (Nicaraguan Coordinating Federation of NGOs Working with Children and Adolescents (CODENI))	1992
	Consejo Nacional de Atención y Protección a la Niñez y la Adolescencia (National Council for the Care and Protection of Children and Adolescents (CONAPINA))	2000
	Procuraduría de Defensa de los Derechos del Niño y de la Niña (children's rights enforcement authority)	1995
Panama	Red Nacional de Protección a la Niñez y la Adolescencia (National Network for the Protection of Children and Adolescents)	1993
	Tribunal Superior de Niñez y Adolescencia (Higher Court for Children and Adolescents)	1995
	Ministerio de la Juventud, la Mujer, la Niñez y la Familia (Ministry for Youth, Women, Children and the Family (MINJUMNFA))	1994

Source: Prepared by Cefas Asensio using information from government sources.

Annex 4

Bodies coordinating non-governmental organizations for the CRC

In Costa Rica: COSECODENI, Coordinadora de Organizaciones Sociales de Defensa de Derechos de los Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes (Coordinating Committee for NGOs Defending Children's and Adolescents' Rights), is a platform for organizations working with the Convention on the Rights of the Child as their frame of reference and implementing programmes at different levels. COSECODENI focuses on monitoring the human rights of minors and on political lobbying and influence. The Coordinating Committee has been working for 10 years in Costa Rica and has links with a number of networks, both regional and international.

In El Salvador: RIA is the Red para la Infancia y la Adolescencia (Network for Childhood and Adolescence), made up of 32 organizations focused on children's issues. It is intended as a consolidated body that can foster a wide-ranging social movement, use public policies to influence the construction of a decentralized system of integrated development and ensure full enforcement of the human rights of children and adolescents. Its mission is to generate political impact by mobilizing society, influencing public opinion and developing training processes guided by the CRC.

In Guatemala: CIPRODENI is the Coordinadora Institucional de Promoción de los Derechos de la Niñez (Institutional Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of Children's Rights) and it coordinates measures to mobilize national society on behalf of children and adolescents and encourage the State and civil society to work for the solution of issues affecting children and adolescents. CIPRODENI works in three basic areas, education, communication and defence/formal complaints.

In Honduras: COIPRODEN, the Coordinadora Interinstitucional Pro Derechos del Niño y la Niña (Interinstitutional Coordinating Committee for Children's Rights), brings together 24 civil society organizations working for the welfare of children in Honduras. Created in 1989 as a non-profit

organization, and with more than a decade's experience in social work, COIPRODEN remains at the leading edge of specialized childhood care thanks to its genuine commitment to adapting its activities to the changing needs of the people with and for whom it works.

In Nicaragua: CODENI is the Federación Coordinadora Nicaragüense de ONG's que Trabajan con la Niñez y Adolescencia (Nicaraguan Coordinating Federation of NGOs Working with Children and Adolescents). It represents 44 non-governmental organizations and its purpose is to promote, protect and defend children's and adolescents' rights.

In Panama: the **Comisión Panameña para el Cumplimiento de la Convención de los Derechos del Niño y la Niña** (Panamanian Commission for Enforcement of the Convention on the Rights of the Child) has been operating since 2000 and represents NGOs working for children's rights. Its role is to monitor and implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It specializes in preparing reports on the situation of children's rights.

Annex 5

Principal characteristics of initial education in Central America

COUNTRY	NAME	LEGISLATION	COMPULSION	LEVELS AND STAGES	INSTITUTIONS AND PROGRAMMES	ADMINISTRATION
Costa Rica	Preschool education	1949 Constitution, reformed in 1997 Fundamental Education Law (Ley Fundamental de Educación) of 1975	From 0 to 6 and a half	*Infant:* ages 0 to 5 and a half *Transition:* 5 and a half to 6 and a half	*Casas cuna* (institutions that assist poor, usually single mothers with young children) Day nurseries Education and nutrition centres, kindergartens Children's comprehensive care centres	Preschool Education Department of the Ministry of Public Education
El Salvador	Initial and nursery education	General Education Law of 1996	From 4 to 6 (nursery education)	*Initial education:* ages 0 to 4 *Nursery education:* 4 to 6	Child development centres (day nurseries) Child welfare centres of the Institute for the Protection of Minors (Instituto de Protección al Menor) Child care centres (*centros de atención infantil* (CAI)) Nursery education sections in educational centres	Ministry of Education
Guatemala	Preschool education	National Education Law of	Non-compulsory	*Infants:* ages 4 to 6	Infant schools (*escuelas de*	

COUNTRY	NAME	LEGISLATION	COMPULSION	LEVELS AND STAGES	INSTITUTIONS AND PROGRAMMES	ADMINISTRATION
		1991 Comprehensive Childhood Care Programme (Programa de Atención Integral al Niño) of the Government Plan 2000-2004		*Pre-primary:* age 6	*párvulos*) for children aged 0 to 4 Sections attached to bilingual pre-primary for ages 0 to 6 Sections attached to Social Welfare Secretariat day nurseries Comprehensive care programmes for children aged 0 to 6 Social Welfare Secretariat comprehensive care centres Ministry of Education accelerated pre-primary programme	
Honduras	Preschool education	Organic Education Law of 1966 National Education Plan 1994-1997 Basic national curriculum for 2000	Non-compulsory	*Pre-kindergarten:* 3 to 4 *Kindergarten:* ages 4 to 5 *Preparatory:* ages 5 to 6	Kindergartens Non-formal preschool education centres Community school initiation centres	Ministry of Education Ministry of Work and Social Security National Social Welfare Board (Junta Nacional de Bienestar Social)

Nicaragua	Preschool education	General Regulations on Primary and Secondary Education of 1993 General Education Law of March 2006	Non-compulsory	*Level 1:* ages 3 to 4 *Level 2:* ages 4 to 5 *Level 3:* ages 5 to 6 (preparatory) Children aged 0 to 3 are catered to exclusively in the non-formal system	Preschool education centres Classrooms attached to primary schools Day-care centres (*casas de cuido diario*) Child care centres (*casas de atención infantil*) Child development centres (*centros de desarrollo infantil*) Care homes (*casas comunales*) Family homes Churches and private centres	Preschool Education Department of the Ministry of Education
Panama	Preschool education	Organic Education Law of 1946 and 1995	Compulsory from 4 to 6	*Nursery 1:* 0 to 2 *Nursery 2:* 2 to 4 *Nursery 3:* 4 to 6	Kindergartens in schools for children aged 4 to 6 Child orientation centres (*centros de orientación infantil*) for children aged 4 to 6 Non-formal family and community initial education centres for children aged 4 to 6	

Source: *Organización y Perspectivas de la Educación Inicial en Iberoamérica*, Organization of Ibero-American States, 2001.

Annex 6

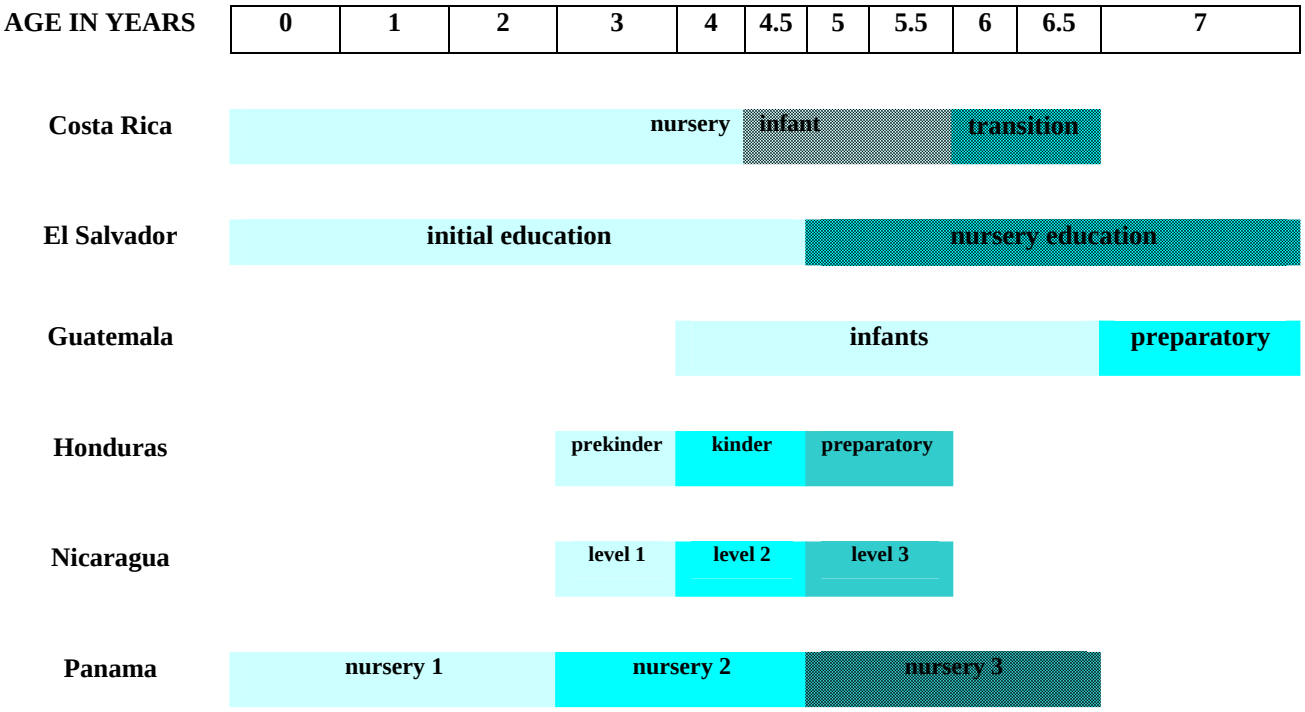
Concerns about the status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in Central America

	Costa Rica	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Nicaragua
Date of report	February 2000	June 2004	July 2001	August 1999	August 1999
Concerns of the committee					
1. The human and financial resources allocated to government institutions with responsibility for children fall short of what they need to discharge their functions	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. The structures and mechanisms for coordinating the different government institutions responsible for children are still inadequate	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. There is insufficient disaggregated data available for monitoring children's rights, particularly in the case of the most disadvantaged groups. The data collected cover only a few of the aspects dealt with by the CRC	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. There are disparities in access to health and education services affecting the countryside (as compared to cities), the very poor, indigenous communities, and disabled children	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5. Indications of marginalization and discrimination against rural and indigenous children, immigrants and girls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6. High rates of teenage pregnancy and inadequate sexual and reproductive health education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7. High indices of children affected by domestic and social violence, including		✓	✓		

	Costa Rica	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Nicaragua
sexual assault					
8. There is little government monitoring and follow-up of child adoptions, and reports suggest that the trading and selling of minors goes on			✓		
9. High index of malnutrition among unweaned infants and under-fives			✓	✓	✓
10. The government has not participated in the investigation of child disappearances during the armed conflict		✓	✓		
11. Society and families have not developed a culture of respect for children's opinions and their right of participation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: OHCHR-UNICEF, 2004

Annex 7



Source: Organization of Ibero-American States.

The structure of initial education in Central America

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